

SEPTEMBER 1996



interZone

III

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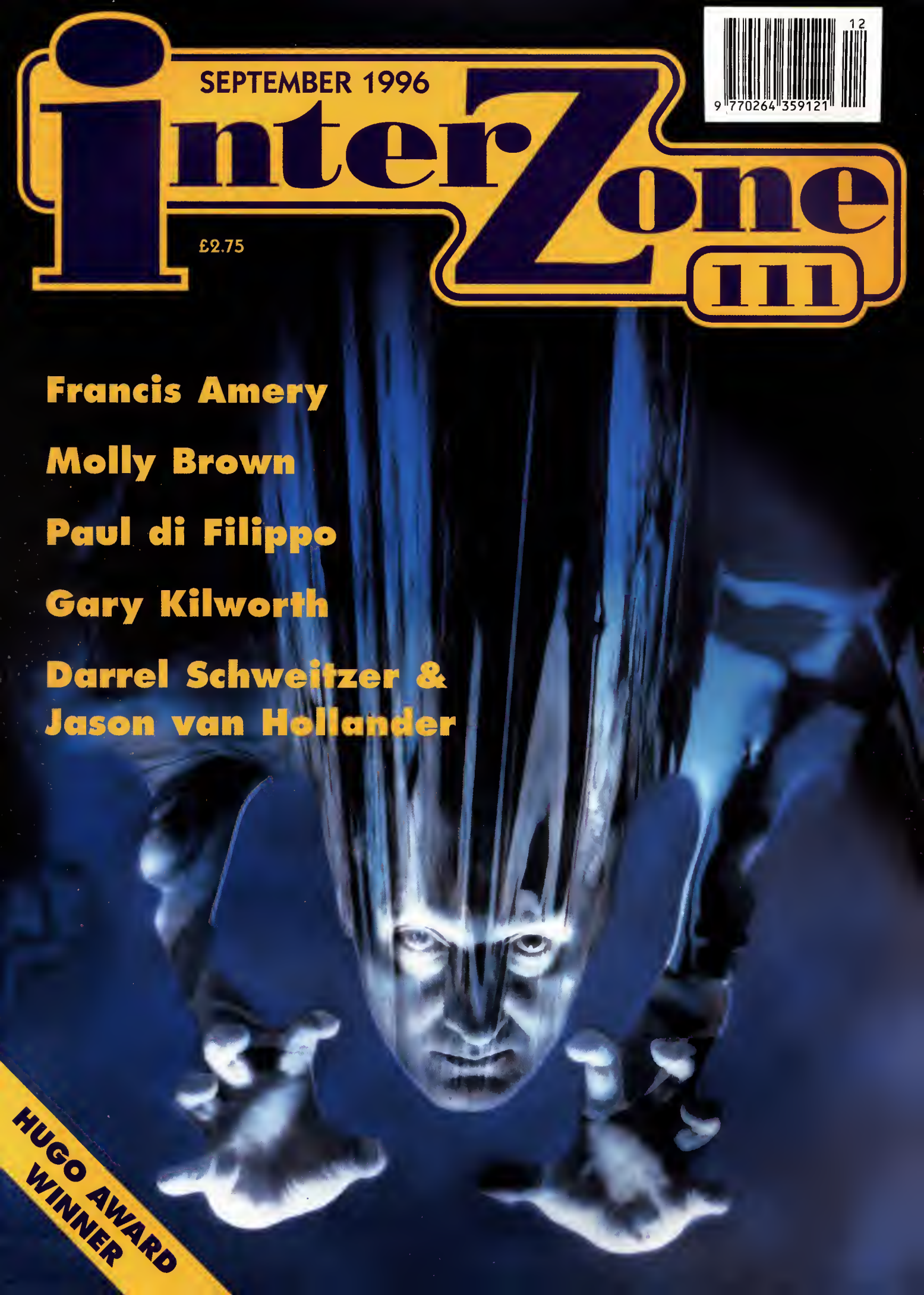
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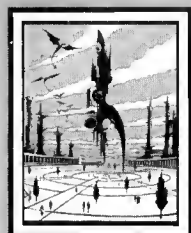
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interZone III

September 1996

science fiction & fantasy

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Dear Editors:

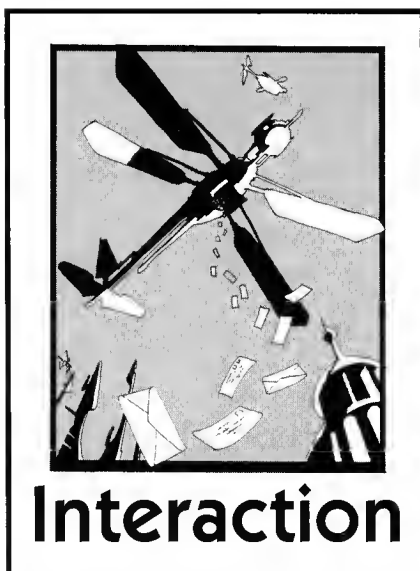
I have a few problems with Chris Gilmore's review of Garry Kilworth's *Cybercats* (IZ 109, July 1996). The first thing to get clear here is that I have not read Kilworth's book, so the negative tone of the review may well be justified. One could, however, question why Gilmore would choose to read a book which, as he admits in his opening sentence, is aimed at the juvenile market... particularly as the resulting review is for *Interzone*. But let's give him the benefit of the doubt by saying he thought *Here's a YA novel by Garry Kilworth, a noted fantasist, so I'll check it out and, if it's good, I'll mention it just in case the average Interzone reader fails to check the juvenile racks at their local Waterstones.*

So far, so good. But what's puzzling then is why, having read the book and deemed it to be "unworthy," he would then let *Interzone's* predominantly adult audience know of its flaws. If it sucks big-time, why not simply forget it and damn it by exclusion? I see no point in bringing news of the existence of a YA novel to a readership not noted for its take-up of YA novels only to trash it (and take such a flamboyant delight in doing so). It's kind of like slagging off a Burger King Whopper in the fast-food review pages of *The Vegetarian's Weekly*.

Kids' books have come a long way since Patrick Moore's Mars series, Angus McVicar's Lost Planet journeys, E. C. Elliott's "Kemlo" yarns and, yes, even Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*. Most of them were good (and the gaudy spines of all of them still adorn my shelves) but few can easily be appreciated by readers of advancing years. I know because I've revisited all of them from time to time, trying to recapture that long-ago feeling of wonder.

Of course, we all know of some remarkable books initially (or even ostensibly) aimed at the younger market but which have subsequently been championed by the more mature reader. Since *The Hobbit* (and its follow-up), we've had at least four novels from Alan Garner – most notably his excellent *The Owl Service* – Mary Wesley's *Haphazard House*, John Gordon's *The Giant Under the Snow*, maybe even, arguably, Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* ... and so on. So, yes, it is worth keeping a weather eye on the kids' section next time you browse for books, particularly if you have a knowledgeable and dependable reviewer in your favourite mag who can help you sort out the wheat from the chaff.

It's a reviewer's place to tell it the way he or she sees it. I'm not averse to a panning – provided it's an objective panning, pointing out why a book doesn't work and giving people touchstones, reference points which allow them to measure the reviewer's quali-



fication to say what's been said. I've written some myself. But, as a rule of thumb, when something doesn't work I tend to leave it out of the column. Like I said before, damn it by exclusion. Unless it's a new work by a major writer or it's a heavily-hyped work by a lesser-known, in which case you have to swallow hard and nail your colours to the mast... even if those "colours" are a skull and crossbones.

But Gilmore's rantings about comic-books and readers of comicbooks are lamentable. In his review, he comes across as the sort of person who regards every soccer fan as a hooligan, every student as a dope-smoking, draft-dodging hippy, and every (pick a political party) member as a (pick the appropriate clichéd stereotype).

The point is, not all rock and roll is tuneless, not every septuagenarian German worked in the concentration camps and not every comicbook is aimed at, to quote Gilmore, "the dim-witted." Elitism is almost as offensive as the spouting of generalities: but when the two come together, it makes for a downright dangerous mixture.

Which particular comicbook titles, for example, does Gilmore have in mind when he says that the moral atmosphere of Kilworth's book is "pure DC comics"? For that matter, how many DC titles does Gilmore read every month? And why DC as opposed to Marvel or First or Big? What exactly does Gilmore consider to be the differences in the various generic products of these companies? Why should picture panels be the sole province of "the dim-witted"? Are followers of Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury*, Steve Bell's *If* and Walt Kelly's classic *Pogo* all dim-witted, then? And that's not to mention Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*... whose stalwart followers include such noted out-and-out thickos as Samuel R. Delany, Norman Mailer, Peter Straub, Gene Wolfe, Stephen King and Harlan Ellison. (Hey, Harlan... Chris Gilmore says

you're dim-witted...) And what was the last book Gilmore read that was printed with joined-up writing?

Towards the (merciful) end of his tirade, Gilmore accuses Kilworth of coming up with "the sort of book that unliterary adults assume children must like by divine, childish fiat." By virtue of his review, Gilmore clearly considers himself to be decidedly literary, even choosing to use the word "fiat" instead of the more commonly-used "decree" or "order." (Yes, I looked it up! *Mea culpa.*) But who is more guilty of painting with a broad brush here? Let us not forget that, while all grass may be green, not everything green is grass.

Pete Crowther
Harrogate, North Yorkshire

Dear Editors:

IZ 109 was the heights and the depths. Ed Gorman's "Cages" would have so disgusted E. J. Carnell of the old *New Worlds* that he would have lost faith in humanity. It was hardly inspiring. On the other extreme, Keith Brooke and Eric Brown's "Appassionata" was inspiring: everything about it was excellent and very enjoyable. Other stories were fillers, not really my kind of reading...

Departments and illustrations all good, "Interaction" quite special. The first letter [the one about the space programme] was so good you really should have sent him an ex-gratia payment! Or an extended sub. Nice one, Mr Donald F. Robertson of San Francisco – I hope you contribute more cheerful and thoughtful writings.

Ernest R. James
Skipton, N. Yorks.

Dear Editors:

I've been a science-fiction fan for a long time now, but there are still areas and aspects of the genre which really irritate me: two in particular at the moment. One of them is *Babylon 5*, the other is cyberpunk. At least, what I call cyberpunk. There are so many sub-genres and labels, most of which are created by authors for their own books, that I just let everything that sound like William Gibson, whether a blatant rip-off or an original work, be classified as cyberpunk.

My problem with *Babylon 5* isn't that I don't like it; I actually think it's fairly good, although not great. My problem is with the hype, and especially one much-mentioned fact: the story arc. So *Babylon 5* has a "unique five-year story arc"? Great. In IZ 109, in the "Spinoffery" section, you comment cynically that this surely can't be the only American TV show to have a continuing narrative. Well, it isn't. One of the more obvious examples, which can be compared with *Babylon 5* is *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

Although there are many episodes which are primarily about single characters and have no relevance to wider, galactic issues, the station itself is always involved in the politics of the area, and does not fall prey to the *Next Generation*, *Voyager* and original-series syndrome of going from planet to planet, solving the problems of a civilization, boldly going where... You get the idea.

In the first season of *DS9*, there's the conflict between the Bajorans, Cardassians and Federation, all of whom want the worm-hole and the station. In the second season, the Maquis arrive, and are still present in the third and fourth seasons. Then in the third season, there are the Dominion, who lead to many episodes, including the downfall of the entire Cardassian military dictatorship. And, just to prove that these plots aren't separate from each other, there are episodes such as "Defiant," where a character from *The Next Generation* arrives, steals a ship designed to fight the Dominion and uses it for Maquis purposes.

And in the fourth season, the Klingons break their treaty with the Federation, due to their suspicions about the Dominion. So *Babylon 5*'s story arc isn't all that unique. Maybe the makers of *DS9* didn't have all five years in mind when they started, but *Deep Space Nine* is very different from the other *Star Trek* series, because the station can't fly off at warp nine to escape trouble: when there's a war, they have to stay and fight. The very nature of the station lends itself to long multi-episode narratives, with minor characters recurring again and again.

When *Babylon 5* started, the *IZ* reviewer commented that the crew "eat hamburgers and watch the war on the galactic equivalent of CNN," as if this behaviour was strange for the crew of a space station in the far future. Well, to use *DS9* again, the crew play darts in Quark's, Chief O'Brien can be seen in "The Way of the Warrior" demonstrating how to toss sweets up into the air and catch them in your mouth; while, in many episodes, as the aliens in Quark's drink a whole technicolor range of drinks, what does O'Brien drink? Pints of beer, that's what. And Captain Sisko uses the holo-suites to watch baseball games, and keeps a baseball on his desk. I mean, you can even buy hot dogs from Quark!

It's strangely reassuring to watch these sf series and note that some things never change. No matter how many bizarre aliens with strange foreheads and stranger ears are sitting on the next table in the bar, humans will still be able to drink beers and talk about sport. This is, to me, one of the reasons why the future envisioned in

Star Trek seems much closer than the cyberpunk visions of a technology-ruled future, where VR/the internet/add-your-own-technological-advance is king. In cyberpunk novels, the characters often, although there are exceptions, seem more alien than a Klingon warrior or a Wookie. If one person from our time was to be sent forward to a Gibsonian cyberpunk future, while one was sent further into Gene Roddenberry's *Trek* future, which would feel most like home? The total-immersion VR systems, where whole lives can be lived inside a computer, or walking into Ten Forward and ordering a pint of bitter from Guinan? Okay? Some might disagree, but even though technology differs the people in *Babylon 5*, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Alien* and so on are the same. When, in *Alien*, Brett and Parker moan about Ripley bossing them around and never working herself, it is just the same as people would act in today's world.

On the *Nostromo*, before Kane's chest explodes, they're sitting around a table, far from Earth, moaning about the food and drinking beer. In cyberpunk, however, the language is based on computers and has almost become a dialect of its own. The people seem to think differently, and although this appeals to some readers, I find it hard to really feel anything for any of the totally computer-obsessed and dependent heroes and heroines. Some of the characters are recognizable and have depth, like the world-weary cops and seductive *femme fatales*, but often it is as if the authors care more about making sure they describe how the VR interface works than what their characters do and say. I know this is just a personal opinion, and many will disagree, but in *Star Trek*, the future feels like the present. The technology is there in *Trek*, there is no doubt about that, but it is at least familiar (although a part of that is the very myth that the series has created).

In a review of *Star Trek VI*, someone commented that when Spock attempted a mind-meld, he didn't even have to say what he was doing, because the writers knew that the audience would understand. On the *Enterprise*, although we might have a vague idea of how the technology works, we don't know in any great detail, and it doesn't matter. The technology is a background, not the central idea. When O'Brien, Data, Torres or Scotty mutters something about using the warp drive to create a stasis bubble, or that they are running low on crystals or, horror of horrors, that the main deflector dish has overloaded, we know exactly what is going to happen: either there'll be a quick special effect, and then a nice glowing and humming force-field, or else the crew will be crawling through the

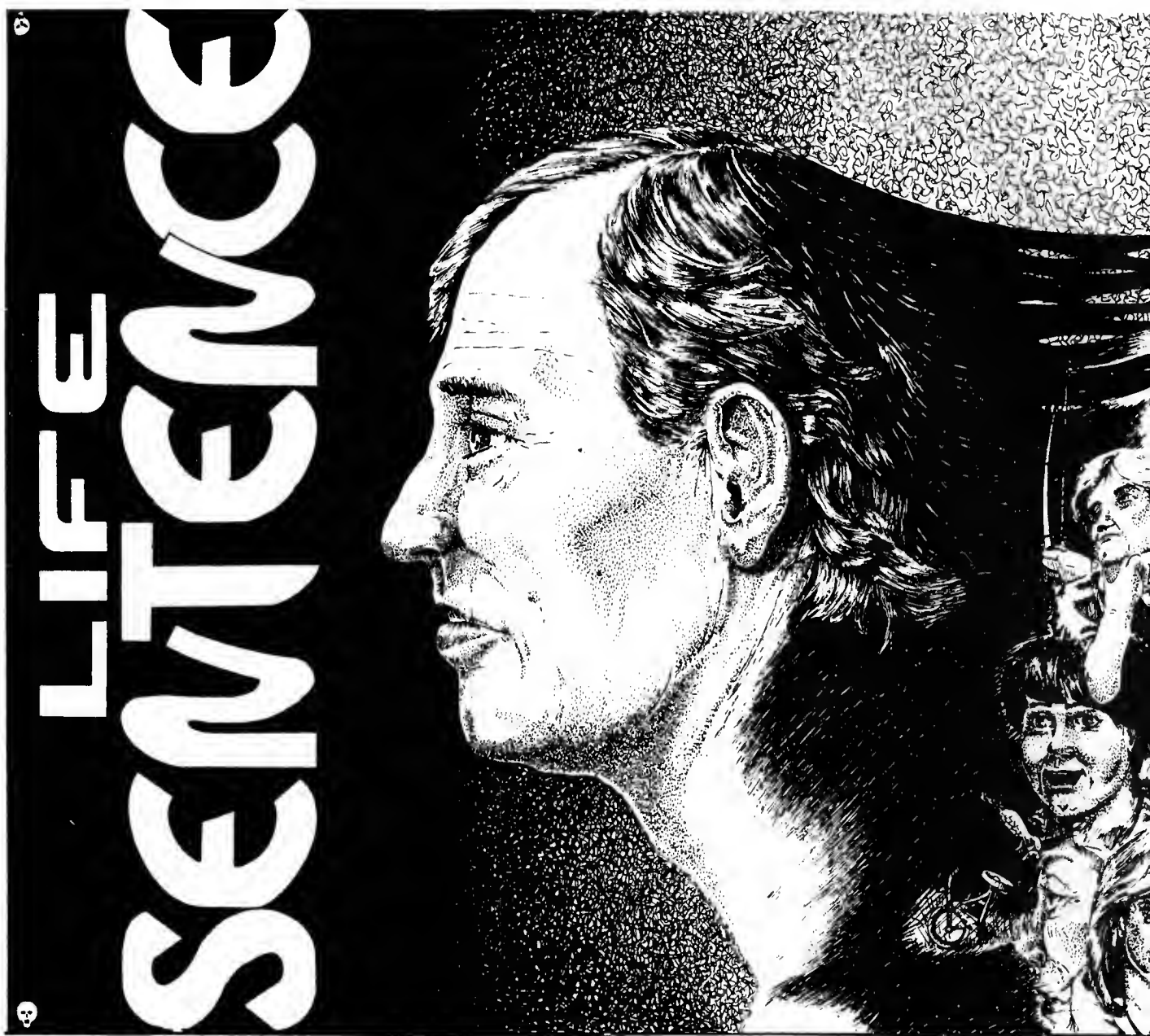
power conduits, sonic screwdriver-equivalent in one hand, bleeping tri-corder in the other. The technology is tangible and visible: when an engineer has to mend something, they end up crawling under consoles, toolkit beside them, and their sleeves rolled up. In cyberpunk worlds, it just doesn't happen. Critics have said that the *Trek* universe is too advanced in some ways, and not changed enough in others. They say that transporters couldn't work, and the physics are all wrong. Well, we don't care. It's not the technology that matters. You don't watch *Trek* to find out how to repair a warp core when it goes critical: they could make up all the jargon (perhaps they do) and it would still sound plausible.

Star Trek is three-quarters of an hour of escapism, but we don't escape so far that we lose sight of the present. The Shakespeare-quoting Klingons, the Arthurian legend and Battle of Britain programmes in the holo-suites, the Vulcan saying that "only Nixon can go to China," all these show that the past is still remembered, while in cyberpunk worlds, there doesn't seem to be a past. In the *Next Generation* two-parter "Time's Arrow," Data, Picard and several of the other crew members travel back to turn-of-the-century America. They manage to fit in, and pass themselves off as people who belong in that time. Would any of the characters from a cyberpunk novel be able to do so? Maybe they just have to develop themselves for a change, not the technology.

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, when the *Millennium Falcon*'s engine won't start and Han has to hit it to get it going, it's a moment familiar to everyone who has ever had their car stall. But in a cyberpunk novel, when a character complains that his data jack is shielded by ice and he's got into a major net even though he's only using a close-wired array (or whatever), it just turns me off. I don't want novels where the technology is everything, and nothing else matters. If I want that, I'll read Michael Crichton or Tom Clancy. The critics who say sf is puerile haven't read any, but those who say it's impenetrable if you haven't read the same books as the authors have read cyberpunk.

Nick Laury
Tunbridge Wells, Kent

Editor: I have this maxim about television fiction, which I made up once: "All TV fiction, whatever the format or genre, aspires to the condition of soap opera." It seems to me you're responding to the old, familiar, soap-operatic elements in *Star Trek*, etc; and in that respect you're probably typical of most viewers. Science fiction pur, whether on page or screen, does demand a leap of the imagination – which may hurt the brain.



The Execution

The nameless man who had killed and been caught, judged and sentenced and jailed to await his own death watched as the authorities prepared to execute his surrogate.

The murderer occupied one place in a bank of seats filled by other invited witnesses to the State's administration of mortal justice. He had not been introduced to any of the other witnesses when the guards had coldly and somewhat roughly conducted him to his seat, and no one had since offered a name or hand to the man.

Understandably so. Quite understandably, as things stood now at this crucial cusp, this instant when the exchange of lives, the legal and spiritual transaction was still incomplete.

But once the execution was over, he had been promised that this would change.

This promise he still found hard to believe or trust. Despite all he had been through to earn it.

With the little bit of his attention and vision not devoted to the spectacle slowly unfolding before him –

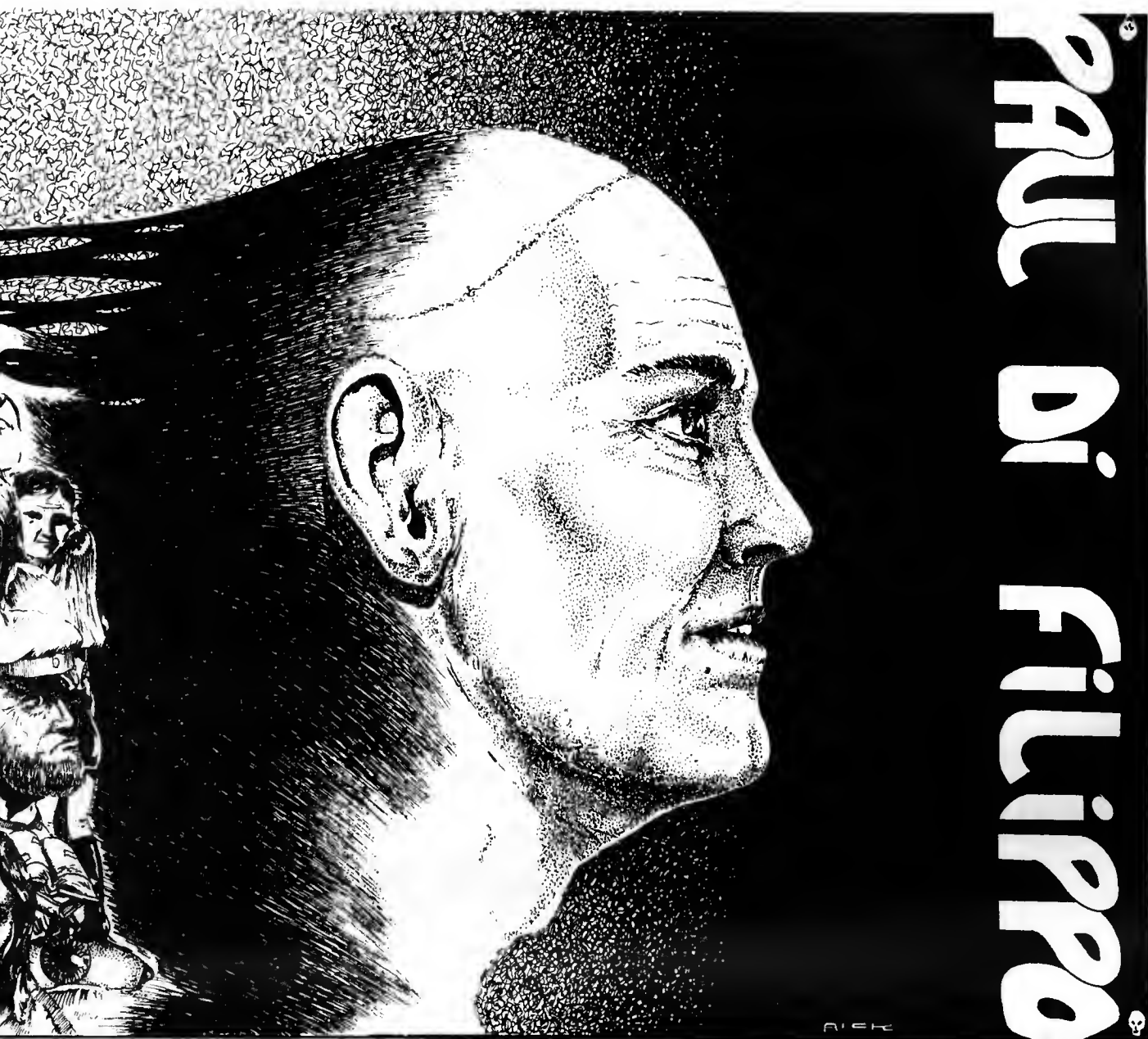
a spectacle in which, save for the most tenuous chain of circumstances, he himself would have been the star – the nameless man tried to assign roles to the others around him.

The Warden, of course, he recognized, as well as the dozen members of the Renormalization Board. Several people tapping busily on laptop keyboards he deemed journalists. A man and a woman who shared an officious, self-important air he instinctively knew for politicians. With a small shudder, he pegged a trio comprised of two expensively suited men and an equally dapper woman as doctors here to observe *him*. An inexpugnable air of the examining – the operating – room still clung to their costly clothes.

But the bulk of the watchers, he knew, were the surrogate's family.

Weeping with quiet dignity, holding onto each other, they disconcerted the nameless man deeply. He could not watch them long, couldn't even count how many there were, or of what sexes or ages.

Yet he knew that soon he would have to match the living, tear-stained faces to the photographs he had



Illustrations by Rick Dawson

studied for so many months.

Soon his intimacy with these strangers would extend far beyond mere faces and names.

There were none of the nameless man's relatives present. Even if the distant kin – distant geographically and emotionally – who still claimed him had wanted to attend, they would not have been allowed to.

After all, what would have been the point? The man he had been was soon to be dead.

Now, across the room, on the far side of a wide sealed glass window, a shifting of focus among the workers there riveted the attention of the nameless man and all the others.

The technicians had finished checking out the mechanisms of death, the drips and needles and biomonitors and video cameras. Some signal must have been passed to those outside the immediate view of the watchers. For now the surrogate was being wheeled in.

The man was cradled by moulded foam supports on a gurney. Thin and wasted, he was nonetheless conscious and alert, thanks to various painkillers and palliative drugs. After he was manoeuvred into the centre

of the web of death-apparatus and the wheels of his gurney were locked, the surrogate managed to raise himself slightly up on one arm to gaze out at the audience, smile wanly and wave weakly with his free hand.

In the brief instant before the surrogate flopped back onto his pillow, the nameless man received the image of the dying man's face into his brain in an instant, imperishable imprinting.

When the cushions and pillows had been readjusted around the surrogate, a triggering device, its cord leading in an arc to the death-apparatus, was placed in his right hand.

Following the surrogate had come a priest of the Gaian Pragmatic Pandemonianists. Arranging his green stole nervously, the priest faced the audience on the far side of the glass. A technician flicked a switch, and sounds from the far side of the barrier – beeps and shoe-scuffings, coughs and whispers – issued forth from a speaker on the nameless man's side.

Then the priest began to speak.

"We are gathered here today to bear witness to the

utmost sacrifice that any individual can make to the society of which he has since birth formed a grateful part. Far greater than such paltry donations as those of blood or organs is what the man by my side will render today. He will give up his very name and identity so that another may live and serve in his place. Doomed to perish of his own incurable affliction, having opted for a voluntary death, this man takes on – legally and ethically – the sins of one of his erring brothers, thus granting the guilty one a second chance. At the same time, the demands of society for justice and retribution are met. A crime – the most heinous crime, that of murder – has been committed, and today it is balanced by the death of its perpetrator. Our laws are not flouted, the guilty do not escape, and the scales of justice swing evenly.

“I will not eulogize the man by my side at any greater length. Last night at the hospital I attended the official farewell ceremonies hosted by his loving family and friends, and we all spoke of him at length, by his bedside, to his smiling face. It was a fine occasion, with joyous memories leavening the tears. He knows with what love and reverence and gratitude he is esteemed, and all the goodbyes and final words have been said.”

The wordless sobs of the surrogate’s family swelled, and the nameless man winced. He rubbed a sweaty hand across the regrowing stubble on his scalp, imagined he could feel the crown-encircling scar, although in truth it was already nearly invisible.

“Now,” the priest resumed, “the man by my side assumes a new identity, taking on the bloody garments and sins of the murderer known as –” Here the priest uttered the name which had once belonged to the seated man on the far side of the glass. Curiously, the once-familiar syllables rang hollow to him, drained already of all meaning, distant as something from a history book.

“It is a light load, however,” continued the priest, “and a burden instantly extinguished in the very taking of it. Christ Himself could do no more. Now, let us pray.”

The sound was shut off. The soundlessly murmuring priest bent over the supine man, and relative silence descended on the audience.

The nameless man did something he thought – he hoped – was praying.

Now the execution room emptied of everyone but the surrogate, recumbent on his trolley, gaunt face obscured. He could be seen with a flick of his thumb to trip the trigger, murderer in truth at the final moment, if only of himself.

The red power-on LEDs of the official recording cameras glared down on the scene. After an interminable ten minutes during which the calculated poisons circulated through the surrogate’s veins and his breathing slowly ceased, the prison doctor entered the sealed room, performed his exam, and looked up. Although he had forgotten to activate the speaker, all could plainly read his lips shaping the words, “He’s dead.”

The Warden stood and approached the nameless man, who flinched. That dour official essayed a tentative smile as cameras flashed, and extended his hand

toward the murderer. The murderer took it reflexively.

“Mister Glen Swan, I thank you for your participation in this event. We will detain you only for a few last formalities, signatures and such. Then you will be free to leave. But now allow me to introduce you to your new family.”

The Murder

The air underground was stale and hot, redolent of train-grease, electricity, sweat, fried food, piss-wet newspapers. The platform was more crowded than the murderer-to-be had anticipated. He had not known of a new play in the neighbourhood, whose audience now spilled out and down into the subway. Such events were outside his calculus, and he would have still been baffled, had it not been for the overheard chance comments of the crowd.

The man felt uneasy. But he finally resolved to carry out his plans.

Necessity – and something resembling pride in his illicit trade – compelled him.

His roving eyes finally settled on a victim: a middle-aged woman in a fur coat, seemingly unaccompanied, clutching a strapless evening purse. He began to move toward her in a seemingly aimless yet underlyingly purposeful path.

The rumble and screech of an approaching train emerged from some distance down the tunnel. People surged closer to the edge of the platform in anticipation.

The man came up behind his apparently unaware victim, within reach of the shiny black purse clutched against her side.

Then it was in his hands. He tugged and pivoted.

The purse did not come. A thin hidden gold chain was looped around the woman’s wrist.

He yanked, she screamed and flailed. He grabbed her wrist to immobilize it so that he could get the bag off. She jerked backward at the touch, the chain parted, his grip slipped, and the woman tumbled out of sight, onto the tracks.

The man turned to flee, but was brought crashingly down within a few yards by two bystanders, large men who began to pound him, smash him with their fists to stop his instinctive resistance.

And because his battered face was pressed into the filthy concrete at the moment he became a murderer, he did not see the train actually kill the woman.

But he heard and would always remember the noise of its useless brakes and the shouts of the witnesses and the victim’s final cut-off high piercing scream.

The Board

“We think we have some chance of success with you,” said the head of the Renormalization Board, as he looked up from closing a window on his laptop, a window full of information on the nameless man. “But everything depends on your attitude. You will have to work at this, perhaps harder than you’ve ever worked at anything before. Your reintegration into society will not be without obstacles nor sacrifices. Do you think you can commit to this course of action? Honestly, without reservations?”

Sitting across a wide polished table from the Board,

the murderer tried to hide his astonishment and suspicion, keep it from altering the silent stony lines of his face. After six months on Death Row, his appeals up to and including the highest court exhausted in the streamlined new postmillennial system, with imminent and certain death staring him hourly in the face, he would agree to anything. Surely they knew that. Anything they could offer, even a life sentence, would be better than the alternative. And as he so far dimly understood the choice before him, it was infinitely more attractive than spending the rest of his natural days behind bars.

But after he said the assuring words these new judges wanted to hear and the Board began to explain exactly what lay in store for him, he began to have his first small trepidations.

"The first thing we are going to do is perhaps the most dramatic, yet surprisingly, not the most crucial. We are going to lift the top of your skull off and insert a little helper.

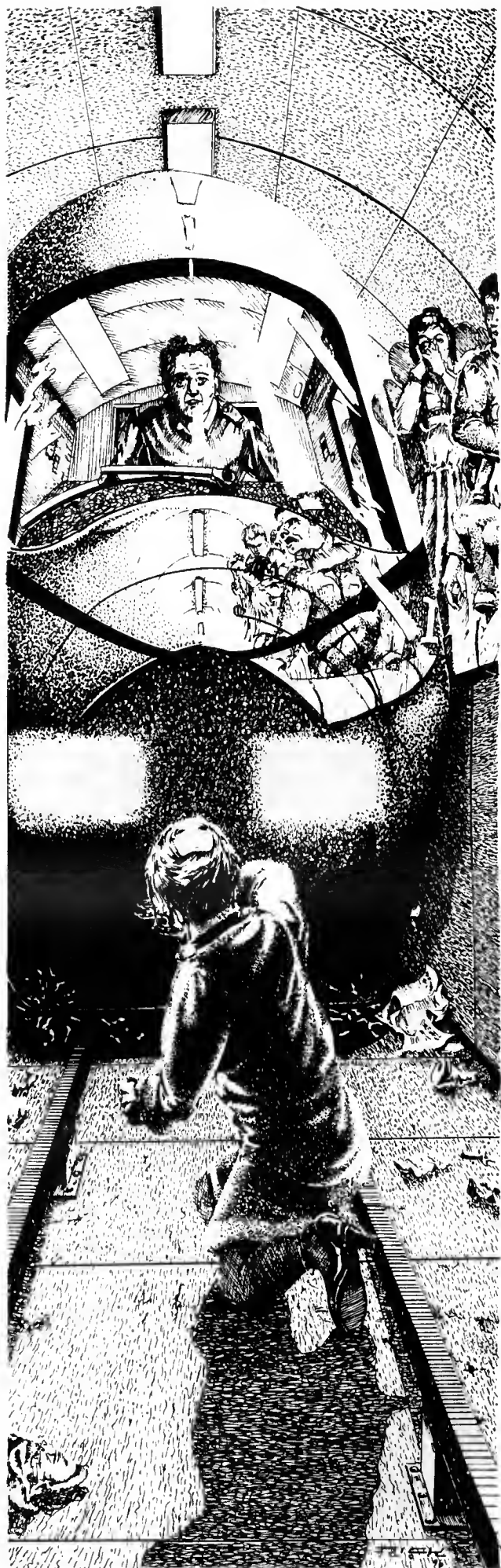
"Your cortex will be overlaid with a living mass of paraneurons known as an Ethical Glial Assistant, which will also have dendritic connections to various subsystems in your brain. This EGA has no independent capacities of its own, and assuredly no personality, no emotional or intellectual traits. You may think of it simply as a living switch. It has one function, and one function only. It will monitor aggressive impulses in your brain. Upon reaching a certain threshold – a threshold of whose approach you will be amply warned by various unpleasant bodily sensations – it will simply shut you down. You will go unconscious, and remain so for a period varying from half an hour to a day, depending on the severity of the attack.

"At this point, we would like to stress all the things the EGA will *not* do. It will not prevent you from physically defending yourself under most circumstances, although some incidents of this sort might very well pass into an aggressive stage and trigger the switch. It will not hinder your free will in any manner. You are always at liberty to attempt aggression; it is just that you must be willing to face the consequences." The Boardmember's voice became very dry. "We can report that most people's automobile driving styles change radically. In any case, we have no interest in turning you into some kind of clockwork human. You would be of little use to society and the planet that way. The EGA is by no means foolproof. It will certainly not thwart a coolly premeditated murder for profit. It works only on spontaneous limbic impulses of rage and attack.

"But we do not feel, based on your case history, that you are at risk for the more calculated life-threatening behaviour. The antidote we are giving you is precisely tailored for the type of person you are. Or once showed yourself to be. With the help of the EGA, you will be rendered relatively safe to mingle with your fellow humans. As safe, in fact, as any of them generally are themselves. Do you understand all this so far?"

The murderer could not focus on anything other than the queasy image of his head being opened and a living mass of jelly dropped in. But then the picture of his cell and its proximity to the execution chambers returned.

"Yes," he said.



"Good, good. Now, we are not going to rely entirely on the EGA. It is, in its way, a last-ditch defence. You are going to undergo an intensive course of remedial psychosocial pragmatics. At the end of that time, if you have exhibited cooperation and commitment, you will be certified a fully functional member of society."

The prisoner could contain the question no longer. "And then, I'll be released? Free?"

The Boardmember smiled wryly. "In a manner of speaking, yes. Completely free. Yet with duties. The duties any of us here might have, to our society and the globe. You'll receive a brochure that explains it all. It's quite simple, really."

The head of the Renormalization Board now opened up a scheduling window on his computer. "Let me see... Assuming you can complete the standard six-month course, and that Mr. Swan survives till then in order to serve as your surrogate – Yes, I think that we can confidently schedule your execution for the 15th of May. How does that sound to you?"

"Fine. Uh, fine."

The Brochure

For the hundredth time, returned to his cell after a day's demanding, confusing, stimulating classes, the prisoner read the brochure.

– *key concept is that of commensurate restitution, combined with the notion of stabilizing broken domestic environments by insertion of the missing human element.*

Previous attempts at reintroducing ex-inmates to society have often failed, resulting in high rates of recidivism, precisely because there was no supporting matrix to cushion the inmate's transition. Uncaring systems comprised of parole officers and halfway houses could not match the advantages offered by a steady job, caring co-workers and a supportive family eager to make the inmate's transition a success.

Obviously such a set of supports is almost impossible to manufacture from scratch. Yet if an ex-prisoner could be simply plugged into the gap in an existing structure, an instant framework would be available for his or her re-entry into society.

The murderer skipped ahead to the part that most concerned him.

Prisoners awaiting capital punishment offer a particularly vivid and clearcut instance of the substitution-restitution philosophy. Basically, as they await their fate, they are non-persons. By their actions, they have forfeited their identities and futures, their niche in the planetary web. In their old roles, they are of no value to society and the planet except as examples of our intolerance for certain behaviours.

Meanwhile, another segment of society ironically mirrors the role of the condemned prisoner. The terminally ill among us have been condemned by nature to untimely deaths. Guilty of nothing except sharing our common mortal heritage, they yet face a sentence of premature death. In most cases, the doomed man or woman is tightly bound into an extended family and set of friends, an integral part of many networks, perhaps the sole breadwinner for several mouths.

How fitting, then, that the terminally ill patient

intent on utilizing his right to voluntary euthanasia (see the Supreme Court decision in the case of Kevorkian vs State of Michigan, 2002), intent also on providing security for his loved ones in his or her absence, should gain a kind of extended life through an exchange with the prisoner who has abandoned his.

The prisoner turned several more pages.

Every attempt is made to match the prisoner and surrogate closely on the basis of dozens of parameters. The environment in which the ex-inmate is placed should therefore prove to be as comfortable and supportive for him as possible. Likewise, his or her new family should have a head start on the adjustment process.

Simply put, prisoner and surrogate undergo a complete exchange of identities. For the surrogate, the road after the exchange is short. For the prisoner, it extends for the rest of his lifetime. There is no return to his old identity or life permitted.

The prisoner assumes the complete moral and legal responsibilities, duties, attachments, and perquisites – the complete history, in short – of his new identity. All State and corporate databases are altered to reflect the change (ie, fingerprints, photos, signatures, vital measurements, medical records, etc. of the dying surrogate are updated to reflect the physical parameters of the ex-prisoner). After taking this action, the State ceases to monitor the ex-prisoner in any special way. He becomes a normal citizen again.

How does restitution occur? Simply by the ex-inmate's willing continuation of the existence of the surrogate, as father or mother, son or daughter, breadwinner or homemaker.

This is not to deny that post-transition changes will almost certainly occur. Minor lifestyle alterations are inevitable; major ones are likely. Any option open to the original possessor of the identity is open to his replacement. Just as the surrogate could have decided to initiate a divorce, adopt a child, switch jobs or relocate his residence, so may the ex-prisoner decide. Yet the important thing is that all such decisions are not undertaken in a vacuum. Domestic, financial and other constraints faced by the original remain, and must be negotiated. Yet the history of this program reveals a surprising stability of these newly reconfigured families.

And of course any illegality perpetrated by the new possessor of the identity is fully punishable, in accordance with relevant laws, bringing down relevant punishments. Parents who abandon their new family, for instance, are subject to arrest and the standard penalties for non-support. Spousal abuse and marital rape merit the strictest punishments...

The prisoner set the booklet down on his knee for a moment, lost in thought. When he picked it up once more, he opened it to the final page.

Perhaps some will say that the State is acting arbitrarily or capriciously in mandating such substitutions. Humans are not interchangeable, some will argue. Emotions and feelings are neglected or trampled. Every individual is unique, one cannot be exchanged for another by government fiat. Utilitarianism has limits, they say. The State is coming perilously close to playing God.

Yet what are the alternatives? To let a perfectly use-

able individual, often in the prime of his or her life, be put to death as in premillennial days, while for lack of one of its prematurely taken members a bereaved family falls to pieces, becoming a burden on State welfare rolls? This is not acceptable, either to the State or to its citizens. And historically, many precedents for such behaviour exist.

Dissenters to this policy might be advised to consider it in terms of an arranged marriage...

The New Home

The car pulled into the short oil-spotted driveway, a length of buckling asphalt barely longer than the shabby old hydrogen-powered compact itself. For a moment, the engine continued to idle. No one emerged. Then the motor was cut, and Mr Glen Swan opened the passenger's door and stepped out.

The postcard-sized yard was ankle-high with the vigorous weeds of late spring. A cement walkway led from the driveway to the scuffed door of a small house that was plainly the architectural clone of its many close-pressing neighbours. The yellow paint on the bungalow was flaking. A plastic trike lay on its side, half on the walk, half on the lawn, one wheel still uselessly spinning in the air.

Swan studied the scene. It was nicer than any place he had ever lived.

And much, much nicer than the prison.

Movement by his left side startled him from his reverie. He hadn't even heard the car's driver-side door open and close.

Without taking his gaze from the house, Swan said the first thing that came to his mind. "Uh, it's nice."

A woman's voice responded, if not flatly, then with a measure of reserve. "It's home."

Swan could not immediately think of what else to say. So, still regarding the house, he repeated something he had said earlier, said more than once.

"I'm sorry you had to drive. It's just that I never learned how."

The woman's voice remained level, neither frustrated nor sympathetic, though her words partook of some small traces of both emotions. "You apologized enough already. Don't worry. You'll learn how soon enough. Meanwhile you can ride the bus. The stop is just five blocks away."

There was silence between them. Then the woman said, "Do you want to go in?"

"Yeah. Sure. Thanks."

The woman sighed. "You don't have to thank me. It's your house too."

The Son

The front parlour was decorated with a wooden plaque bearing a pragmatist inspirational motto (REGARD ONLY THE OUTPUT OF THE BLACK BOX), a framed print of a nature scene, a dusty artificial bouquet. The couch and chairs had seen much wear. A low table held several quietly murmuring magazines, the cheap batteries powering their advertisements running low with age.

There were no pictures displayed of the man who had died in Swan's place. But Swan had no trouble calling up his face.

There was another woman inside the house. She was trim, on the petite side, brown hair cut short, and wore a pair of green stretchpants topped by a white sweater in the new pixel-stitch style. Her sweater depicted a realistic cloud-wrapped Earth.

"Hi," the woman said, attempting a small smile. "Welcome home."

Because of his studies, Swan recognized the woman as his sister-in-law, Sally.

"Hi, uh, Sally." He extended his hand, and she shook it. Swan liked the fact that people would shake his hand now. He was starting to believe a little more in all this, in the whole scenario of exculpation, although every other minute he still expected the carpet of his freedom to be pulled from beneath his feet, sending him tumbling back into his cell.

"Will's in his bedroom," said Sally a little nervously, addressing mostly the other woman. "He was very good all morning. But when he saw the car..."

Emboldened by the ease of the transition so far, of his seeming acceptance by the two women, made slightly giddy by the very air of freedom on this, the late afternoon of the day of his execution, recalling several of the mottos of his pragmatics classes that counselled forthrightness and confidence, Swan said, "I'll go see him."

The layout of the house had been among his study materials. Swan strode confidently to the boy's bedroom door. He knocked and called out, "Will, it's me, your father."

Behind him the two women were quiet. Through the door came no words, just small sounds of a small body moving.

Swan raised his hand to knock again, but before he could the door opened.

Will was four, but tall for his age. From photos Swan knew his face very well. But he could not see it now.

Will wore the all-enveloping rubber mask of some kind of reptilian alien, possibly from *Star Wars VI*.

"You're Glen now," the boy said, his voice muffled.

Swan squatted, putting his face on a level with the goofy mask. "That's right. And you're Will."

"No," said the boy firmly. "Not any more."

The Wife

Their first supper together as a family of three was a largely silent affair, save for a few neutral questions and comments, perfunctory requests and assents. Swan tasted nothing vividly, except perhaps the single beer he permitted himself. Never much of a drinker, he was somewhat startled to find how much he had missed the flavour of the drink, the feelings of sociability it conjured up, while in prison.

Will had been convinced to discard his mask for supper. Swan smiled frequently at him. The handsome young boy – Swan fancied he could spot some affinities between the young face and the one he himself saw in the mirror each morning – returned the smiles with a look not belligerent, but distant as the stars.

Much of the meal Swan spent covertly studying his wife.

Emma Swan both cooperated with and slightly frustrated this inspection by eating with her head mostly

lowered over her plate.

Swan's wife resembled her sister Sally in height and build. But her face, thought Swan, was prettier, and her longer, lighter hair suited her. Although some of her movements were nervously awkward, she exhibited an overall easy grace.

Glen Swan had been a lucky man, he thought.

But I'm Glen Swan now.

So does that mean that I share his luck?

Shortly after cleanup, which Swan volunteered to handle, it was time for Will to go to bed.

Wearing one-piece pyjamas, Will emerged from his bedroom. A different mask hid his features, this one of a Disney character, some kind of animal prince or hero, Swan guessed.

Emma herded the boy up to where Swan sat.

"Say goodnight to your father."

Will had adopted a chirpy new voice to go with the mask. "Good-eeek-eeek-night."

Mother and son went into the bedroom. Swan did not follow.

He could hear Emma reading a book aloud. Then the lights were extinguished, and she came out, closing the door softly behind herself.

Swan's wife took a seat on the couch. She looked at Swan directly for the first time that day, as if perhaps the ritual in the bedroom had given her strength or firmed up a decision.

"Do you want to watch some TV?"

"Sure."

Watching TV, Swan knew, meant they didn't have to talk.

Right now, this first night, that was just as well.

But he knew they couldn't watch TV for the rest of their lives.

Hours passed. Once, Emma laughed at a sitcom. Swan enjoyed hearing her laughter.

Shortly before midnight, Emma clicked off the television. She stood and stretched.

"You have to be at work by eight. Me too."

"Right, right," Swan agreed readily. "And Will -?"

"I'll drop him off at the daycare on the way to the Wal-Mart."

The couch seemed to be a sofa-bed. Swan looked around for signs of bedding. But Emma's next words informed him differently.

"When Glen - When the sickness hit us, I got twin beds in. It made things easier for everyone... Anyway, I've thought about this a lot. We can't act like complete strangers, hiding things from each other. We have to share this small house. Bathroom, whatever. Getting dressed. So we have to be at least as close as roommates. Like in a dorm. Anything else - I don't know yet. It's too soon. Is that okay with you? Am I making any sense?"

Swan considered how best to answer. "Roommates. That's fine."

Emma slumped in relief. "Okay. That's settled. Good. Let's get to sleep. I'm completely wiped out."

Lying in the dark, Swan listened to Emma's breathing, only a few feet away. The rhythm of her breath gradually smoothed out and softened, till he knew she was asleep.

He had expected her to sob. But after some thought, he realized that her tears must have been drained long ago, the very last ones shed in the death chamber.

And certainly not for him.

The Job

His boss was a big man with the startling, abnormally delicate hands of a woman. His name was Tony Eubanks. Tony was the supervisor for a crew of ten men, split between five trucks. Normally Tony stayed put in the office, dispatching his fleet, scheduling assignments, handling paperwork. But for the duration of Swan's training period he would go on the road with Swan, functioning as Swan's partner and teacher.

Swan knew that this was special attention, for his special case. So, of course, did everyone else. The people in charge of his future, while not actively monitoring him, had nonetheless seeded his path with mentors.

Swan tried not to think of Tony as a jailer or warden. Luckily, as Swan soon discovered to his relief, Tony's attitude made it easy to regard him as simply a more knowledgeable co-worker, perhaps even a friend.

The attitudes of the other linemen, however, were less easy to pin down.

For the first few weeks, busy learning and doing, Swan was able simply to ignore them.

He and Tony were stringing cable. Lots of new cable. It was some kind of special new cable meant to treble the bandwidth of the net. Swan never got a really firm grip on the physics behind the wire. But then again, he didn't need to. All he needed to master was the practical stuff. The tools, the junction boxes, the repeaters, the debugging tricks, the protocols. He concentrated on these with his full attention, and was proud to realize that he could learn such things, mastering them fairly easy.

The physical side of his job was enjoyable too. Up and down poles, into ditches and tunnels, popping manhole covers, manhandling big reels, driving the truck. All of these actions appealed to him.

Tony, however, was not so enthralled. In the truck, with one of their endless cups of coffee in hand, he would frequently say, in a kindly way, "Jesus, kid, I'm getting too old for this kind of workout. I can hardly get to sleep at night for the fucking aches and pains. I'm glad you're picking up on things quick. I never thought I'd say it, but I can't wait to see my fucking desk again."

The hard work had the opposite effect on Swan's sleep patterns. Each night, after the repeated rituals of meal, television, and brief, safely shallow conversation with Emma, he dropped off into dreamless slumbers.

Part of the job involved dealing with customers. It was the hardest part for Swan to adapt to. Entering offices and homes, he encountered a spectrum of people utterly foreign to him. At first, he would stammer and perform clumsily. Forms that had to be filled out confused him, and Tony would have to intervene.

But after a time, he found himself warming to even this aspect of his job. One day he was surprised to find himself actually looking forward to dealing with a complex installation that required him to speak frequently with a pretty woman manager in charge of the project.

Tony approved of Swan's new interpersonal skills.

One day when they had just left the job site, he said, "You handled her nice, kid. And she really had a bug up her ass about those delays. Couldn't have done it any better myself. In fact, you'd better watch it or the suits are gonna catch wind of how slick you've gotten and the next thing you know you'll be locked up behind a desk all day like me."

Swan beamed. He felt close to Tony. Close enough to ask him the next day a long-held question about his hands.

Tony held up his small hands without embarrassment. "These mitts? Replacements. Lost my original ones in an accident on my old job. Got a little too careless around an industrial robot. I was one of the first patients where the graft took. Back then, they had to do it within the first 24 hours, the donor had to match nine ways from Sunday, a lot of shit they don't have to worry about nowadays. Anyhow, everything came together so's I had to take these or nothing." Tony was quiet a moment. "She died in a car crash while I was lying in the hospital. Head crushed, but hands fine. I still see her parents now and then."

Swan was silent, as was Tony. Then the older man shrugged.

"No big deal, I guess. They can replace anything nowadays."

The Merger

It happened over the course of the next eight months, by a process Swan could neither chart nor predict.

He became, on a level sufficiently deep to pass mostly out of conscious scrutiny, his new self.

In his own eyes and his adopted family's.

What caused the merger was nothing other than simple daily repetition, the hourly unrelenting enactment of a good lie engineered by the State. The continuous make-believe, bolstered by a mostly willing shared suspension of disbelief, eventually solidified into reality. Under the sustained subtle assault of the mundane and the quotidian, the blandishments of the hundred bland rituals and the shared demands of a thousand niggling decisions, reality conformed to imagination.

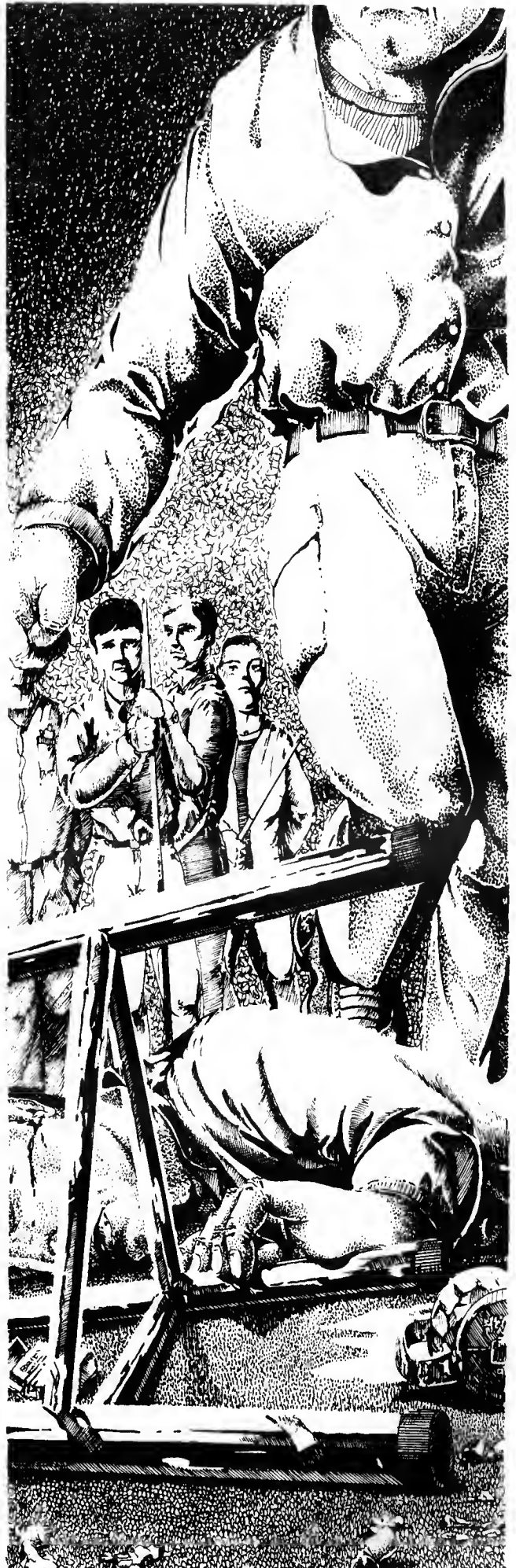
What greased the way was a desperate willingness to succeed on the part of Swan and Emma, a loneliness and void, shaped differently in each, yet reciprocal, that eagerly accepted any wholesome psychic fill.

The path to the merger was made of uncountable little things.

Swan had very few clothes to call his own. It was only natural for him to use those of the man who had preceded him. They fit remarkably well, a fact the Renormalization Board had doubtlessly reckoned with.

Will enjoyed making models out of the new memory clay for children. Swan discovered a facility for shaping that allowed him and the boy to spend some quiet hours together.

His sister-in-law Sally, having overcome the hurdle of meeting him early on, was a frequent visitor. With her husband, Al, and their daughters, Melinda and Michelle, the two families went places: the movies, picnics, amusement parks, the beach. Apparently, reports back to the rest of Swan's new relatives were encour-



aging enough that the massive multifamily get-together held each Labour Day did not have to be cancelled this sad, strange year.

At the outdoor gathering Swan's head spun from greeting so many familiar strangers, from heat and sun and the usual over-indulgences of food and drink. But by day's end, he had earned high accolades from Emma.

"They liked you. And you fit right in."

Emma.

She taught him to drive. They shopped for groceries together, went to conferences at Will's daycare together, watched endless hours of television side by side on the couch, apart at first, then holding hands, then her in his arms.

But each night, even after a year, Swan slept in his bed, and she in hers.

The Torment

Swan had been paired with a guy named Charlie Sproul for several months. Charlie was fairly silent and self-contained, not very friendly. It wasn't like working with Tony. Swan tried to make the best of it though.

One afternoon in the locker room, Swan was surprised when Charlie and a couple of other linemen asked him out for a drink.

He accepted.

"I'll just call home," Swan said.

"Don't bother," said Charlie. "We won't be long."

They drove in their cars to a part of town Swan didn't know. The bar was a rundown place called The Garden. Flickerpaint scrawls on the windowless walls teased Swan's peripheral vision.

At the threshold, Swan sniffed. The place smelled bad inside, like some kind of subterranean den or tunnel, half familiar in a dreamlike way that made him very uneasy.

But Swan told himself he was being foolish, and went in.

The room was hot and noisy and smoky; the conversation was boring and felt contrived. Midway through his second beer, Swan began to prepare excuses for leaving. But then his fellow linemen said they wanted to play pool. Swan didn't play, so he said he'd stay at the bar and watch.

As soon as his co-workers had crossed the room, leaving Swan alone, several strange men drifted up and stood around him.

"Hey, egghead," one said. "Yeah, you – the guy with the egg thing in his head. How's it feel to steal someone's life?"

Swan felt a line of heat high up around his brow like a hot wire tightening into his skin, a sharp crown. He stood up, but there was no room to move. The barstool pressed against the back of his legs.

Swan's mouth had dried up. "I don't know what you're talking about..."

"We're talking about how the wrong guy died. It should have been –"

The man spoke a name Swan vaguely recognized. The mention of the name left him genuinely confused. They were talking about someone he no longer knew, someone who didn't exist any more. "I don't under-

stand. My name is Glen Swan..."

The men laughed cruelly. "He really believes it!"

"He's a *fried* egghead!"

Swan tried to push his tormentors aside. "Let me go. I don't need this!"

"No, you need this!" one said, and swung a heavy fist into his stomach.

Swan doubled over. Then he was submerged in a flood of punches and kicks.

He called for help, but no one came, none of his new "friends."

He felt consciousness slipping away.

But he was pretty sure he managed to black out naturally and on his own, without the help of the EGA.

The Doubts

After he got out of the hospital, Swan found a new job waiting for him. With Tony's help he got the position in customer relations that Tony had predicted for him.

But nothing felt the same.

Who was he?

Was he a stranger falsely trying to fill another man's shoes?

Or was he who he had willed himself – at first half-heartedly, then earnestly, with the help of others – to become?

These questions occupied his every waking moment. Mostly he tended to come down on the blackest side of the dilemma.

How could he ever have imagined he could slip so easily into someone else's old life? He was a fraud, an impostor. Everyone was just pretending with him, pretending to like him, pretending to tolerate him, pretending to accept him as what he was not and could never be.

Even Emma?

Even her.

Emma in her cold bed.

One day when his doubts reached an unbearable intensity, Swan began making discreet inquiries.

Inquiries that brought him one day after a week's searching to arrange an appointment for his next lunch hour.

The Decision

As he made ready to go to work that morning, Emma said, "Glen – I realize how hard things have been for you lately. But I want you to know that I believe in you. Nothing's your fault, Glen. And someday those guys who beat you up will get caught. Even if they don't, they'll pay somehow, in the end. I really believe that, and you should too."

Swan winced inwardly at the memory of his beating, but did not comment on Emma's notion of justice. Justice – or revenge – was something that would soon be within his own grasp.

If he truly wanted it, knew what to do with it, how to best have it.

Emma seemed desperate to reach him, as if she sensed the enormity of this day. "You've been good to me and Will, Glen. And if I haven't been quite as good to you, well – it's because I needed time. I can be better. We can be better together."

Swan did not reply. Emma looked down at her hands folded in her lap. When she raised her face, her cheeks were wet.

"I – I really couldn't stand to lose you twice."

Swan left.

There was no sign that the door Swan faced at noon in a shabby part of the city belonged to a doctor's office. And inside were no reassuring accoutrements of medicine, no diplomas or cheerful receptionist or old dying magazines or fellow patients.

Just a man. A man who sat behind his desk in a highbacked chair in the gloom, swivelled so that Swan never got a good look at his appearance. He was a voice only, and even that voice, Swan suspected, was electronically disguised.

"– not responsible for any side-effects," the man was saying. "The whole thing is highly experimental still." The man chuckled. "No FDA seal of approval. But the beauty of it is that it's just one spinal injection. Bam! Straight to the brain and your little parasitical friend dissolves and gets scavenged. If everything goes okay, that is. Then you're free."

Free. But for what? If he just wanted to run away from everything, he could run away now. He didn't have to kill the thing inside his head just to run. It wasn't a leash or a fence.

But the EGA was a symbol. That, he realized, was the calculated subtlety of it, of the State's reformatory schemes. It didn't even have to function to fulfil its purpose. It could be a placebo for all he knew, a ruse. But even so it was strong, a monument, a permanent symbol of the agreement he had entered into. A token of the exchange he had made, the life that had been extinguished in his place, the new bonds he had willingly assumed. To kill the thing in his head meant to deny the entire past year, to abrogate his contract with his new life.

To focus instead on spite and revenge, on hurting and pain.

Swan began to feel sick to his stomach. Was it the EGA kicking in? Or just the natural reaction of whoever he was?

The doctor was talking. Swan tried to focus on what he was saying.

"– not your fucking fault –"

Emma's face swam up into his vision.

"Nothing's your fault, Glen."

Swan stood up. "I've decided."

The doctor's voice was gloating. "Great. Now we can get down to the important things."

"Right," said Swan, and turned to leave.

"Hey," said the doctor. "Where you going?"

"Back to my job, back to my home, back to my wife."

Back to my life.

Paul Di Filippo, born 1954, has published just two books to date, *The Steampunk Trilogy* (1995) and *Ribofunk* (1996), but he has been a star of the sf magazines since the mid-1980s. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and his most recent story here was "Flying the Flannel" (issue 103).

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ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Filled with wild rumour, suspect speculation, gross exaggeration, dirt and innuendo... unputdownable." – Harry Harrison. Thank you, Harry! To explain: I've been fishing the murky waters of sf circles for promotional blurb lines, as requested by NESFA Press for *The Silence of the Langford* (a hugely expanded trade paperback of their earlier Langford nonfiction collection *Let's Hear It For The Deaf Man*). It's actually rather embarrassing to ask people for quotable quotes; Brian Aldiss explained that it is also embarrassing to be asked, but nevertheless offered "Deaf maybe, but he's the seeing eye of SF humour. In the Country of the Blind the One-Eared Man is King." Good old John Grant came up with "For my money, Langford is the funniest writer active in the sf field today. Why has no one awarded him a Hugo?" I seem to have misled Harry Harrison – a side effect of not being able to provide people with copies of what they were so sincerely praising – and he provided a blurb line for this page, as above. John Clute was so generous that even my shrivelled modesty forbids quotation here; likewise Charles Platt. Others took a different line, like Bruce Sterling with "For me, Dave Langford has always represented the highest and definitely the most virulent strain of fandom," Terry Pratchett's "Wit, slightly deaf person, raconteur and finest swordsman in all of Christendom," and Joe Haldeman's enigmatic commendation "David Langford writes like a pixie with sharp teeth. Perhaps rabies." Pat Cadigan was very Pat Cadigan, beginning: "Bad! Bold! Brazen! No Apologies and No Prisoners! But, enough about me ..." Neil Gaiman permitted recycling of a horror chapbook blurb: "Only Dave Langford knows the meaning of the word fear.*" (Footnote: "The other words only Dave Langford knows the mean-

ing of are *Labile*, *Glabrous* and *Scrotiform*.) Lionel Fanthorpe indefatigably offered eight quotes, including "Reading Langford is like eating jugged hare and sleeping with Mrs Beeton for dessert!" and "More fun than flying with the Red Baron on his last mission!" Brian Stableford and Jane Yolen ... but space allows only this last deft compliment from Peter Nicholls: "It is a tragedy to readers of serious fiction that David Langford has recklessly chosen to squander so many of his splendid talents on demagoguery aimed at science fiction fandom, the street people of the literary world. His inflammatory rhetoric may stimulate and madden the great unwashed, but it's hardly art." Which several of these magnificent quotes, each alone worth the price of admission, will appear on the actual jacket? Place your bets now.

THIS SENTENCE NO VERB

Terry Bisson is completing the late Walter M. Miller's unfinished sequel to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, for 1997 publication. The 600pp Miller MS is set in the time of the first novel's final section, but uses none of its characters.

Pat Cadigan, feisty immigrant, went dewy-eyed over the guy who isn't the horror novelist: "The Original Chris Fowler and I were married on May 9 in Haringey.... John Clute did a playful turn as matron-of-honour, while Judith Clute handled media-related duties and additional glamour. I know the prospect of Pat Cadigan in full-time residence is the sort of thing that induces ecstasy in you. Try to remain useful and competent nonetheless. You dog."

George Alec Effinger is having a rotten time: "I'm being sued by the hospital to whom I've owed many tens of thousands of dollars for years. My attorney tells me that because of local state law, the hospital may end up owning not only all the books and stories I've ever written, and not only all the books and stories upcoming, but also my continuing characters, even after I'm forced into bankruptcy. I may just give up writing and join the Merchant Marine or something."

Leon Garfield (1921-96), the noted children's novelist, and author with Edward Blishen of that effective retelling of Greek mythology *The God Beneath the Sea*, died on 2 June.

John Grant was urgently consulted when Gollancz heard from "an Arthur C. Clarke fan offended by the fact that the last two **GENTRY LEE** and Arthur C. Clarke books he'd bought had contained profanities like *fuck* ... Could it be guaranteed that *Richter 10* by **MIKE McQUAY** and ACC was oathless, before he lashed out his £15? Could I, asked Jo Fletcher, recall from copyediting the thing? *Fucked if I can remember*, was all I could respond."

Simon R. Green struggles to raise this page's cultural tone with criticism of *Barb Wire The Movie*, "a tits and guns, leave your brain at the door, no plot to get in the way of the action, film. When I was 15, I would have loved this film. Now I'm 40, I loved this film. It practically defines the phrase guilty pleasure. Great fun was had when Barb had to run anywhere, and they switched to a stunt stand-in because Pamela Anderson couldn't run in the costumes they had her stitched into."

Ethel Lindsay, the long-time Scottish fan who did so much to hold together British sf fandom in the 60s and 70s, died of cancer in June. She was much loved – for perpetual kindness, for her fanzines *Scottish* and *Haverings*, and for more than 30 years as UK agent for Andrew Porter's US magazines *Algol*, *Starship* and *SF Chronicle*.

Brigitte Helm, remembered in sf for her role as Maria (and robot double) in the 1926 classic movie *Metropolis*, died in June. She was born in 1906; she also acted the title role of *Alraune* (1928, 1930), and Antinea the literally man-destroying Atlantean queen in *L'Atlantide* (1932).

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Dare Today, Gone Tomorrow. The new UK Sunday paper *The Planet on Sunday* appeared on June 16, sold poorly, and instantly folded – despite its "brand new full-colour adventure" of Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, by Sydney Jordan.

Bram Stoker Awards (for horror). Nonfiction: *The Supernatural Index*, Mike Ashley and William Contento. Collection: *The Panic Hand*, Jonathan Carroll. Short: "Chatting With Anubis," Harlan Ellison. Novellette/Novella: "Lunch at the Gotham Cafe," Stephen King. First novel: *The Safety of Unknown Cities*, Lucy Taylor. Novel: *Zombie*, Joyce Carol Oates. Life Achievement: Harlan Ellison.

In Typo Veritas. Publicity flyers for the coming *Gerry Anderson: An Authorized Biography* (by Simon Archer and Stan Nicholls) credit the celebrated puppeteer with a tv series called *Stringray*.

Andromeda Bookshop, Birmingham's legendary sf specialist outlet, was 25 years old in August. They celebrated early, in July, by moving to larger premises at 2-4 Suffolk Street and holding a vast opening party and signing session.

Thog's Masterclass. "He pressed the button of the vibratory emulator; there was an inaudible beam, a wavelength of death, a movement that was less than a movement, and a motion that was less than a motion. And yet there were movements and motions that were more than movements and motions." ("Karl Zeigfried," *Android*, 1962)

Doing Things

MR VINER, said a woman's voice, IT'S TIME TO WAKE UP NOW.

Josh Viner drove down a winding country lane, eventually pulling to a stop in front of the rose-covered cottage he shared with Mary Lou and the children. The kids – Ben and Annie – rushed up to meet him, demanding to know what he had brought them. Then Mary Lou appeared in the doorway, her hands white with flour – she'd been baking again – her belly distended with their third child, due any day now...

That can't be right, a voice at the back of Josh's head said. This was a man's voice; it sounded like his own.

He was 15. It was the night of the sophomore dance and Mary Lou was sitting on a folding chair next to the wall, her long black hair tied back with a scarlet ribbon. He walked across the room, took her hand and led her out onto the floor. From that moment, they each knew there would never be anyone else...

It wasn't like that, said the voice in Josh's head, it never happened. You were too scared to ask her to dance, too scared to even say hello.

You were a misfit. You didn't dress like the others. You didn't like the right music or have the right hair-cut. The year you turned 15, your skin erupted like a volcano. The night of the dance, you stood alone in a corner, talking to no one. Mary Lou caught you staring at her and you looked away. A month later, your father was transferred to Moonbase and you were glad to go.

Shut up, Josh told the voice.

TIME TO WAKE UP, MR VINER, the woman's voice repeated.

After the dance, Josh and Mary Lou walked hand in hand along the river, then sat down to watch the sun rise...

No.

Josh leaned back on his data couch and plugged into work, a baby gurgling happily on his lap.

"I'd better take him," Mary Lou said.

"It's all right; he's not in my way..."

No, no, no! Listen to me! This isn't real!

MR VINER, DO YOU HEAR ME? asked the woman's voice.

It was a warm summer evening. Josh and Mary Lou sat on the front step of their cottage, watching the children play in the red glow of the sinking sun. Tim, the youngest, toddled towards them on chubby legs, clutching a bouquet of dandelions. "Sometimes I wonder what life would have been like," Mary Lou said, "if

we'd never met."

Josh took a deep breath, inhaling the smell of freshly cut grass. He closed his eyes, listening to the chirping of crickets under the porch, the call of a bird soaring high overhead, the bark of a neighbour's dog. "I can't even imagine it," he said.

MR VINER... MR VINER!

"Hmmm?"

MR VINER, YOU MUST WAKE UP NOW.

"Mary Lou?" Josh tried to open his eyes. They felt as if they'd been glued shut. He raised a hand to wipe the crust from his lashes, then blinked several times, trying to get his vision into focus.

He was naked, cocooned inside a padded plastic capsule. There were tubes attached to his arms and legs. Beyond the open capsule lid was a low metallic ceiling; beyond an open panel in the ceiling was a camera lens. "Where am I?"

YOU'RE DISORIENTED, the woman's voice observed. COMPLETELY UNDERSTANDABLE. YOU'VE BEEN ASLEEP MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS.

A hundred years? "Who are you?" he demanded. "Where are you?"

I'M YOUR SHIP'S COMPUTER, MR VINER, AND WE'VE JUST LANDED ON NEW EDEN.

"New Eden?" And then it all came back to him. "Oh God."

Josh sat in a small basement office at the Moonbase headquarters of the New Eden Foundation, facing the white-haired man who had introduced himself as Doctor Herman. "I'll be perfectly frank with you, Mr Viner. The position was offered to two other candidates before yourself, both of whom turned it down once they realized the long-term commitment it entailed." The elderly man shrugged. "We are a privately funded non-profit organization with no connections to the government or the military, Mr Viner. We can't order someone to give up the equivalent of several lifetimes in order to prepare a distant planet for the benefit of future generations. What we need is someone dedicated to the ideals of the project."

Josh had read an article about the project – and the group behind it – a few months earlier. They said it was financed by a religious sect based on the teachings of a pacifist mystic with utopian socialist leanings. The new planet was to be developed as a home for the current generation's great-great grandchildren. Josh supposed he had to give them credit for thinking ahead. "Does that mean you're offering the job to me?"

"You do understand that by the time you arrive at your destination, your loved ones will all be dead."

"I don't have any loved ones, doctor. Your ad specified someone with no ties or dependents, willing to relocate, remember?"

The doctor shrugged. "It's still a great sacrifice. One hundred years of deep sleep to get there, approximately another hundred years in stasis until the colonists arrive – interspersed with brief periods of wakefulness during which you will be expected to install and supervise various terraforming nanomachines. And one thing I must make clear to you is that the ship you will be travelling in is only capable of a

one-way journey. Once you land on New Eden, it will be impossible for you to leave."

"In other words, I won't be coming back... ever?"

"That is correct, Mr Viner."

He felt like telling the doctor there was nothing for him to come back to anyway; at the age of 35, he was still a low-grade nanotechnician with few or no prospects for advancement, living alone in a basement efficiency. But saying that might jeopardize his chances of being selected for the mission. Instead, he said he was enthusiastic about the long-range vision for the future of humankind that the New Eden Project represented.

It was a lie.

The only thing he was enthusiastic about was the chance to start life over again, in a new place with new people – people who hadn't even been born yet, people who would come later, in an armada of gleaming ships to populate a world that he had created especially for them. They would wake him from his long sleep on the planet's surface, knowing nothing about him except that he was the nanotech who had gone ahead to pave the way, the pioneer who had terraformed a new world from scratch. In the future, he could re-invent himself, become a different person. No one would remember the nobody he'd once been; to the gentle pacifists of New Eden, he would be a hero.

He leaned forward, looking earnest. "I believe in everything the project hopes to achieve and I think I have a contribution to make."

The doctor stood up and extended his hand. "Welcome aboard, Mr Viner."

YOU SHOULD EAT SOMETHING SOLID, the computer told him as he unhooked the last of his tubes. BUT NOT TOO MUCH; YOUR DIGESTIVE SYSTEM –

"Please spare me the details."

SOLID FOOD HAS BEEN STORED IN THE –

"I know where it is."

DON'T SIT UP TOO FAST, the computer warned him.

"I'm all right," he said, pulling himself into an upright position and climbing out of the capsule.

IT MIGHT BE BETTER IF YOU DIDN'T TRY TO STAND JUST YET. YOUR BLOOD-PRESSURE READING IS LOW –

"Computer, you're getting on my nerves, you know that?"

MY ONLY CONCERN IS FOR YOUR WELL-BEING. The panel in the ceiling closed as one in the wall facing him slid back, revealing another lens at eye level. Josh suddenly felt uneasy in his nakedness, despite the fact he knew there was nothing behind that lens but circuitry. He supposed it was the voice that made him feel self-conscious. They would give the computer a woman's voice, wouldn't they? "Do you have to watch me all the time?"

The wall panel slid closed.

Josh crossed over to the cupboard where his clothing had been stored. And then he looked out the window. "I don't believe it," he said.

Panels all over the ship flew open. IS SOMETHING WRONG, MR VINER?

"Give me a surface analysis of the planet," he said, gazing out at a landscape of rolling hills covered in

lush vegetation bathed in the glow of two brilliant red suns.

The computer began a litany of percentages of various gases in the atmosphere.

"Just tell me: is it breathable?" Josh interrupted.

YES. It then began a list of chemical and mineral components in the soil, which Josh ignored in his rush to get outside.

He leapt out of the airlock, spreading his arms. New Eden was a paradise. The blue cloudless sky gradually gave way to pink and purple around the twin setting suns. The evening air was warm with a slight breeze carrying a heady mix of exotic, musky scents from brightly coloured flowers and huge striped fruits unlike anything he had ever seen. The planet was perfect as it was; it didn't need terraforming at all. There was hardly anything for him to do. But the colonists didn't need to know that, he reminded himself.

"Computer," he said as he re-entered through the airlock, "transmit this message immediately: Have arrived safely, stop. New Eden requires much work. Oxygen levels low –"

MR VINER, the computer interrupted. MY READINGS INDICATE OXYGEN LEVELS ARE MORE THAN SUFFICIENT.

"Just transmit the message! Oxygen levels low, toxicity levels high, breathing apparatus required at all times, poor soil in need of enrichment, but will do my utmost to ensure habitability in time for colonists' arrival. Signed, Joshua Viner, chief nanotech."

CHIEF NANOTECH?

WHO'S MARY LOU? the computer asked as Josh sat down to his first solid meal in more than a century. Despite the abundance of fresh fruit growing just outside the airlock (which the computer was still running a number of tests on, even though it looked safe enough to Josh), on the computer's suggestion he was limiting himself to a small bowl of rehydrated imitation chicken broth and a handful of easily digestible, tasteless crackers.

"What?" he said, spraying cracker crumbs.

MARY LOU, the computer repeated. IT WAS THE FIRST THING YOU SAID WHEN YOU WOKE UP.

"I don't know any Mary Lou," he said, reaching for the soup bowl.

DON'T YOU?

He raised the soup to his lips and lowered it again; too hot. "Well actually, now I think about it, there was a girl in high school... Mary Lou Johnson, that was her name. It was the year my father got sent to South Carolina. He was in the army, you see, and we were always moving from place to place, never staying anywhere for long. I doubt I was in that school more than six or seven months..." He blew on the broth to cool it, gazing in fascination at the little ripples this action created. Had it really been a hundred years since he had touched anything? "Funny I should still remember her after all this time. I mean, I hardly knew her, really. In fact, I doubt we ever spoke... Not even once."

BUT YOU DREAMED ABOUT HER, the computer prompted him.

Josh suddenly realized what was going on. "I get it! This is some kind of psychology program, isn't it?

Make me think I've got someone to talk to, is that the idea? Keep me from going insane?"

IS "GOING INSANE" SOMETHING THAT CONCERNS YOU, MR VINER?

"No, it isn't."

I'M GLAD TO HEAR IT, the computer said. NOW TELL ME ABOUT MARY LOU.

Josh destroyed all his stocks of unnecessary nanoware. With the nanos gone, the colonists would assume the breathable atmosphere and lush vegetation were thanks to Josh's diligence in distributing huge amounts of microscopic self-replicating machinery across the planet's surface. The oxygen producers, soil enhancers, toxicity filters, all of them could go straight into the disposal unit.

There was one type of nano he didn't throw out. It gradually ate away at the ground, flattening even the steepest hills: a handy way of creating a landing pad for the armada of ships which should be arriving in about a century, by which time the nanos had been programmed to deactivate. He spent several days spreading the microscopic machines over an area of several square miles, marking the future spaceport's site with a radio beacon to guide the ships in to the prepared site.

Then he went back to bed, to await the day he would be hailed as a hero.

Josh stood at the back of the rented marquee at the bottom of the garden, sipping a glass of champagne as he surveyed the scene. No expense had been spared for Annie's wedding; Mary Lou had insisted on that. The band was no holographic simulation – he had hired a live ensemble. And there were flowers everywhere. Even the musicians had been bedecked with flowers. Hundreds of guests were eating and drinking and dancing, mostly relatives from his wife's side of the family. Mary Lou had a lot of cousins.

Ben was there, of course, with his wife and new baby. And Tim had come home from performance art school; he was on stage at the moment, singing with the band.

"Your son has a beautiful voice," a passing cousin remarked.

Josh nodded and smiled, reaching for another glass of champagne.

MR VINER.

He turned to see who was speaking. The glass slipped from his hand, shattering into pieces on the ground. There was no one there.

MR VINER, I NEED YOU TO WAKE UP NOW. YOU HAVE A VISITOR.

A visitor? That had to mean his centuries of sleeping had finally come to an end; the colonists had arrived at last. He leapt up from his capsule, zipped up his clothes, smoothed down his hair, sprayed his mouth with breath freshener, then pressed the button to open the airlock.

There was no one there.

He looked outside, expecting to see half a dozen huge ships disgorging thousands of people. There was nothing. "I thought you said the colonists were here."

THE COLONISTS AREN'T DUE FOR ANOTHER 75 YEARS, MR VINER. I SAID YOU HAVE A VISITOR.

He closed the airlock door and turned back towards his sleep capsule, yawning. "I don't see any visitor. Maybe you should do a self-diagnostic or something."

IT'S STILL THERE, MR VINER.

"It?" He looked out the window. A small animal was peering up at the ship from a clump of bushes a few feet away from the airlock. "Seventy-five years to go, and you woke me up for some little beastie?"

IT HAS BEEN EXAMINING THE SHIP, MR VINER.

The animal was about three feet long, with a chubby body. Its head and legs seemed to be covered in short brown fur, while the skin across its back was hairless and shiny black in colour. Josh leaned closer to the window and tapped on the glass. The beast rose up on its hind legs, revealing another large patch of hairless dark skin stretching across the front of its body. It had a large round belly and the most enormous eyes Josh had ever seen. "Examining the ship? Yeah, sure."

IT WAS TRYING TO OPEN THE AIRLOCK DOOR BEFORE I WOKE YOU.

Josh laughed and shook his head. "Was it really?" He could just imagine it sniffing curiously around the base of the ship, its little paws scrabbling away at the impenetrable hull.

The animal was really very cute, kind of like a living teddy bear. Josh could imagine the colonists going wild over these inquisitive little creatures, wanting them as pets. He tapped on the glass again. "Hello, little fella."

The animal took a hesitant step forward, its huge doleful eyes staring straight at Josh.

"Look at that!" Josh exclaimed. "He comes when you call him!"

Josh slipped a small stun gun into his pocket (just because the thing had a pair of big goo-goo eyes didn't necessarily mean it was harmless; it could have teeth like razors for all he knew), then stepped back into the airlock.

The beast leapt back into the bushes as the door slid open. "Here boy," Josh said, bending forward and snapping his fingers. "Nice boy, nice little fella."

The creature re-emerged from the bushes and Josh saw that what he had mistaken for a hairless patch of skin was actually a garment; the alien was wearing a kind of jerkin. And it was armed; a small wooden club hung from a belt around its waist.

"I bring you greetings from the people of Earth," Josh said, abruptly changing his tone.

The little native began shrieking a series of strange syllables. No one had prepared Josh for anything like this. They'd told him there was no evidence of intelligent life on New Eden. Or any other newly discovered planet, for that matter. They had told him humankind was alone in the universe.

And now he was being shouted at by a teddy bear. He shrugged and grimaced to show he didn't understand. The alien stamped a foot and pointed to something in the distance. Josh looked where the alien was pointing, and suddenly didn't need to understand the other's language to know what it was saying. The high, lush hills Josh had spread with nanos a quarter of a

century earlier were now squat bumps on the landscape, topped with flat discs of reddish dirt that had been stripped of all vegetation. "I'm sure we can work something out, maybe some kind of compensation..."

The creature reached for its club, raising it high in a threatening gesture.

Josh pulled the stun gun from his pocket, then froze, horrified at the sight of the alien bringing the club down hard... on its own head.

"Stop that!"

The creature hit itself again.

"Stop it!" Josh screamed, trying to wrest the club away from the little native. It was impossible; the creature had a tenacious grip. As they were struggling, at least a dozen more club-wielding locals leapt out from the bushes. One of them shouted something that sounded like an order, and then they all started hitting themselves.

"Stop it!" Josh screeched, desperately trying to grab hold of a dozen swinging clubs at once. "Stop it right now!"

It was hopeless. He was surrounded by a group of living cuddly toys, apparently intent on mercilessly battering their own skulls. He watched them open-mouthed, his hands hanging uselessly at his sides. No matter how much blood they drew, they kept hitting themselves. Even as they lay on the ground, dazed and semi-conscious, they still raised a feeble arm to club themselves one last time.

A voice came from a speaker next to the airlock. MR VINER, PLEASE COME INSIDE AT ONCE!

"Do something!" Josh shouted at the computer. "They're killing themselves!"

IF YOU WISH TO PUT AN END TO THIS, PLEASE GET INSIDE THE SHIP! NOW!

The carnage halted the moment Josh stepped through the airlock. He paused beside the window, watching the little creatures sprawl bleeding and exhausted on the ground.

"Oh my God," Josh muttered. "Oh my God. What are we going to do about them?"

WE DO SEEM TO HAVE A PROBLEM, the computer admitted.

The situation rapidly escalated over the next few days. The original dozen wounded were joined almost immediately by another 20 demented little cuddlies, bearing supplies of food and sleeping bags.

And then the army arrived.

Suddenly, there were thousands of them. The land Josh's nanos had begun clearing for a spaceport was now a huge campsite, the flattened hilltops covered with row upon row of white tents stretching far into the distance. The ship was under constant guard, with troops of cute little spear-carrying beasts in red coats with shiny buttons, relentlessly marching up and down below Josh's window. He sat in a chair next to the control panel, staring helplessly at the scene being played out before him.

"Why don't you do something?" he demanded of the lens in the panel beside his elbow.

AND WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST I DO, MR VINER? the computer asked patiently.

Josh threw up his hands. "I don't know! Talk to them, I guess."

IN WHAT LANGUAGE DO YOU SUGGEST I TALK TO THEM, MR VINER? ENGLISH? FRENCH? JAPANESE, PERHAPS?

"In their own language, of course! Don't you have some kind of translation chip or something?"

I HAVE SEVERAL, the computer replied. FOR ENGLISH, FRENCH AND JAPANESE.

"Oh, great. Digital sarcasm."

ACTUALLY, LEST YOU UNDERESTIMATE MY ABILITIES. I AM FLUENT IN A TOTAL OF 59 LANGUAGES ALTOGETHER, INCLUDING SEVERAL OBSCURE REGIONAL AND TRIBAL DIALECTS, NONE OF WHICH HAS THE SLIGHTEST RESEMBLANCE TO THE LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY THE NATIVE INHABITANTS OF THIS PLANET. I AM WORKING ON IT, BUT I NEED MORE TIME.

"Time for what?"

"TO ANALYSE THE APPARENT CONTEXT OF CERTAIN SOUNDS, PATTERNS OF REPETITION, COMBINED WITH POSTURE AND FACIAL EXPRESSION –

"In other words, you need to hear them talk," Josh interrupted. "So let's get them talking." He leaned over the control panel, flicking the switch marked: *Outside Broadcast*.

"Hello, everyone," he began, keeping his voice low and soothing. Even if they didn't comprehend the words, he hoped they would understand the tone. "I'm sorry we seem to have got off to a bad start, but it's never too late to put these things right. I mean, once you get to know me, you'll see I'm not such a bad guy, really. So why don't we sit down and have a little chat?"

He paused, waiting for some kind of reaction. There didn't seem to be one; the troops carried on as before, silently marching up and down with their little pointed spears.

"Is this thing working?" he asked the computer.

It didn't answer.

He flicked the switch marked: *Manual Override*.

I WOULD ADVISE YOU TO BE CAUTIOUS, MR VINER. WITHOUT SUFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE OF NATIVE MORES AND CULTURE, YOU MAY FIND YOUR ACTIONS DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD.

"Hello, everyone," Josh said again. The guards marching below the window stopped in their tracks, looking up, while others poured out of nearby tents. "I'm really sorry we haven't had the chance to talk before now, but I'm hoping we can make an effort to get to know each other, become friends –"

THEY ARE NOT COMPUTERS WITH DECODING CHIPS, MR VINER, the computer interrupted. JUST SPEAKING ENGLISH AT THEM – NO MATTER HOW LOUDLY AND CLEARLY – WILL NOT MAKE THEM UNDERSTAND YOU. YOU ARE WASTING YOUR TIME AND THEIRS.

"Then I'll just have to try something else." He walked over to the airlock.

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING? the computer demanded as the airlock slid open. MR VINER, COME BACK HERE THIS INSTANT! JOSH!

He stepped down onto the ground, watched by hundreds of chubby little beasties clutching spears and swords and daggers. Josh spread his hands, palms upwards, to show he had nothing to hide.

The computer's voice came from the outside broadcast speaker. MR VINER, TRUST ME, MY ONLY CONCERN NOW AND ALWAYS IS FOR YOUR WELL-BEING. PLEASE COME INSIDE BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE. BASED ON MY OBSERVATIONS OF YOUR PREVIOUS BEHAVIOUR AND PSYCHOLOGY, I MUST WARN YOU: CONTINUING WITH THIS COURSE OF ACTION MAY MAKE YOU EXTREMELY UNHAPPY.

"Shut up," Josh hissed as one of the cuddly critters stepped forward to approach him. Its cape was bright red embroidered with gold and it wore a big floppy hat with holes for its pointed ears. It stopped in front of Josh, looking up at him with liquid eyes.

"Pleased to meet you," Josh said, holding out his hand.

The alien drew the sword hanging from its belt, plunging it deep into its chest. It fell dead at Josh's feet.

Josh stared down at it in disbelief, still holding out his hand.

Then they were all at it, slashing their throats with daggers, throwing themselves onto their spears, thrusting pointed swords into their chests and abdomens.

Josh ran back into the airlock, screaming.

I TOLD YOU YOU'D ONLY UPSET YOURSELF, said the computer.

More reinforcements arrived the next day and this time they had guns. One by one, little furry beings with large sad eyes positioned themselves beneath Josh's window. And one by one they blew their brains out.

"What are they doing?" Josh demanded of the computer. "What do they want?"

I THINK THEY WANT US TO LEAVE, the computer replied.

"This is how they get someone to leave? By killing themselves? But it's stupid; it's crazy!"

IT IS ALSO HIGHLY EFFECTIVE. WOULDN'T YOU LEAVE IMMEDIATELY, IF YOU COULD?

"All right, I would. But it's still crazy!"

PERHAPS, the computer admitted. BUT SUICIDE AS A FORM OF PROTEST IS NOT UNKNOWN ON EARTH –

"All right," Josh said. "I get the point."

IN CERTAIN CULTURES, TO KILL ONESELF IS TO BRING SHAME UPON THE ONE WHO PROVOKES THE ACT, RATHER THAN THE ONE WHO COMMITS IT –

"I said I get the point, computer!"

"SO IT WOULD SEEM CONFLICTS ON THIS WORLD ARE RESOLVED BY ONE PARTY SHAMING THE OTHER INTO RETREAT, the computer went on blithely. AND AS YOUR SHIP IS STILL HERE, THEY PROBABLY CONCLUDE YOU HAVE NO SENSE OF SHAME.

Josh covered his face with his hands, groaning. "Why didn't we know they were here? Where were they hiding when we landed?"

I DO NOT BELIEVE THEY WERE HIDING, MR VINER. MY GUESS IS THAT – CONTRARY TO FIRST IMPRESSIONS – THIS AREA IS NOT TYPICAL OF THE PLANET'S SURFACE AFTER ALL, BUT IS RATHER, LIKE SOME WILDERNESS AREAS ON EARTH, A PLACE YOU MIGHT REFER TO AS "THE BACK OF BEYOND." IF YOU HADN'T SPREAD THOSE NANOS TO CHANGE THE LANDSCAPE, THEY NEVER WOULD HAVE KNOWN WE WERE HERE.

"If just my presence provokes this kind of reaction, what's gonna happen when thousands of colonists arrive 75 years from now? They'll wipe themselves out, won't they? There won't be a single one of the little kamikazes left! We've got to contact the colonists, tell them not to come. Tell them to turn back."

THEY ARE ASLEEP, MR VINER, the computer reminded him.

"So wake them up!"

I DOUBT IT WOULD DO ANY GOOD, MR VINER. EVEN IF I DID WAKE THE COLONISTS, AND EVEN IF THEY DID TURN AROUND, YOU WOULD STILL BE HERE. AS LONG AS THIS SHIP REMAINS, THE NATIVE POPULATION WILL CONTINUE TO EXTERMINATE THEMSELVES IN PROTEST. AND THEN AS YOU ARE WELL AWARE, THERE IS NO WAY THIS SHIP CAN LEAVE THE PLANET.

"Oh God," Josh moaned. "What am I going to do? I can't just sit here and watch this!"

THEN I SUGGEST YOU RETURN TO SLEEP, MR VINER. BY THE TIME YOU WAKE UP, IT WILL ALL BE OVER.

The kids had been pressuring Josh and Mary Lou to sell the house and move into a retirement complex in the city. The place was too big for the two of them on their own, they said, the garden too much work for a man of Josh's age.

My age, Josh thought defiantly as he and his wife sat in their rocking chairs on the front porch. He felt as fit and energetic as he had in his 20s. He looked at Mary Lou, dozing beside him. Her long black hair had turned silver, her hands become gnarled with arthritis, but inside she was still the teenage beauty he'd fallen in love with when they were both 15.

He nudged her gently. "Mary Lou, if you had it all to do over again, would you have done anything differently?"

"Like what?" she asked him, yawning.

"I don't know," he said. "Anything. Would you have made different choices along the way?"

"No, I wouldn't change a thing," she muttered, going back to sleep.

"And neither would I," Josh said, patting her on the hand.

MR VINER.

Josh grabbed hold of his wife's arm, shaking her. "Mary Lou! Mary Lou, wake up! I need you."

MR VINER.

"Don't let them take me, Mary Lou. I want to stay here with you, forever."

MR VINER!

Josh moaned, afraid of what he'd find when he opened his eyes. "Don't tell me," he said. "The natives are dead and the planet belongs to us, hurrah. Well guess what? I don't want to wake up to the extinction of a race. I don't care if there's 2,000 people waiting outside to meet me, I don't care if they wanna throw me a ticker tape parade, I wanna stay with Mary Lou."

EXCUSE ME, MR VINER?

"Just let me go back to sleep! I just wanna go back to sleep. I wanna stay asleep forever, okay? There's nothing for me to get up for, you hear me? Nothing!"

MR VINER, WE'VE RECEIVED AN URGENT MESSAGE FROM MOONBASE —

He shook his head, thinking he couldn't have heard right. "Moonbase?"

I HAVE BEEN MONITORING ALL EARTH AND MOON TRANSMISSIONS SINCE TAKE-OFF, BUT THIS ONE IS ADDRESSED SPECIFICALLY TO YOU. MESSAGE BEGINS: "Political situation has undergone drastic change. Military coup has resulted in martial law in Europe and Asia. Fear factional fighting may spread to Moonbase. Military takeover appears imminent. Previous schedule has been abandoned, everything pushed forward. Colonists preparing for launch at earliest opportunity. Signed, Edgar Herman."

"Edgar Herman?" Josh repeated, suddenly wide awake. Doctor Herman had been an old man before Josh left Moonbase. "How long ago was this message sent?"

NINETY-NINE YEARS, FOUR MONTHS AND 13 DAYS AGO, the computer replied.

"What?"

"WE ARE MANY LIGHT YEARS FROM EARTH'S SOLAR SYSTEM, MR VINER. TRANSMISSIONS TAKE TIME TO REACH US. THAT PARTICULAR MESSAGE WAS TRANSMITTED 25 YEARS AND 27 DAYS AFTER YOUR OWN DEPARTURE. THEIR NEXT LAUNCH WINDOW WOULD HAVE BEEN FOUR MONTHS AFTER THAT, WHICH MEANS THE COLONISTS SHOULD BE ARRIVING 74 YEARS EARLIER THAN EXPECTED, IN APPROXIMATELY 12 MONTHS' TIME.

Josh sighed and rubbed his eyes. "How long have I been asleep?"

TWO DAYS.

"Two days? No wonder I'm so tired." He pulled himself up, stumbling over to the window in time to see another cute little cuddly raise a gun to its head. He turned away as it pulled the trigger. "Computer, you know I didn't want to see this, so why bother waking me up? If they're going to commit mass hari-kari a year from now, I don't want to be a witness. I'd much rather sleep through it."

BASED ON MY ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION, I BELIEVE THAT IF THE NATIVES ARE ALLOWED TO COMMIT MASS SUICIDE IT WILL MEAN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE COLONISTS AS WELL.

"Huh? How's that?"

I'M PICKING UP THE PRESENCE OF EXPLOSIVES, MR VINER. ENOUGH TO BLOW UP THE ENTIRE PLANET.

"Explosives? If all they ever do is kill themselves, then how come they've got explosives?"

UNDER ORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES, I WOULD ASSUME THEY USE EXPLOSIVES FOR SUCH PURPOSES AS MINING, MR VINER. BUT THESE ARE NOT ORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES — TO THE NATIVES OF THIS PLANET, I AM AFRAID THIS IS WAR — AND THIS MORNING I OBSERVED LARGE AMOUNTS OF EXPLOSIVE MATERIAL BEING TRANSPORTED INTO THE AREA.

Josh looked out the window in time to see a cuddly rush towards the ship carrying something that looked like a stick of dynamite. He averted his eyes as the stick exploded.

"Wake up the New Edenists and tell them to turn back," Josh said.

THEIR FUEL SUPPLY WILL BE NEARLY EXHAUSTED. THE NEW EDENISTS MUST LAND ON THIS PLANET; THEY HAVE NOWHERE ELSE TO GO.

"And the minute they land, the cuddlies will blow

the place up.”

UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING TO STOP THEM, MR VINER.

Josh sat beside a speaker, listening to the sound of sonorous chanting, accompanied by a slow drumbeat. The suns had gone down hours ago; through the window he could see fires burning in the darkness. Funeral pyres, he supposed. The ritual suicides below his window seemed limited to daylight hours, when he was more likely to observe them. Now, in the darkness, only two guards had been left beside the ship while the others went to chant around the fires at the campsite.

Josh crept over to the airlock and crouched down, ready to pounce. His plan was to capture the guards – or at least one of them – but they both swung around the instant the door slid open, managing to shoot themselves in the head before his feet even touched the ground.

So it was on to Plan B. Josh slunk away on tiptoe, cursing silently to himself. At least none of the others seemed to have been alerted to his escape; the chanting must have drowned out the sound of the gunshots.

A lantern glowed inside a tent at the edge of the campground; inside it, he saw a single reclining shadow. Josh positioned himself behind a tree, watching as the shadow inside the tent reached up to extinguish the lantern. He waited several minutes; no sign of any other cuddlies nearby and the one in the tent should be asleep by now. He hoped.

He stripped to the waist, then burst in through the flap, stuffing his shirt into the cuddly's mouth as he pinned it down with the weight of his body and wrapped it up in its own blanket.

He hurried back to the airlock with a thrashing bundle draped over his shoulder. Its arms and legs trapped, the cuddly's attempts to injure itself were reduced to repeatedly banging its head against Josh's back. He threw it into the sleep capsule while he went to look for some rope. When he came back, it was banging its head on the capsule lid. He lifted it out before it managed to knock itself unconscious, then tied it to a chair.

With its arms tied behind its back, it started kicking itself, so Josh had to tie down its legs as well. When it started banging its head against the backrest, Josh taped a pillow to the back of its head.

“Okay,” he said, removing the gag from the cuddly's mouth. “Come on, yell at me. Tell me what a bastard I am, call me every name you can think of. Just talk, say something, anything, so that heap of junk that calls itself a computer can start figuring out your language.”

THERE'S NO NEED TO BE ABUSIVE, MR VINER.

The creature moaned, twitching as if it was in pain.

Josh knelt down beside it, placing a hand on its furry arm. “Please, don't look at me like that. I'm not trying to hurt you; I'm trying to stop you from hurting yourself. I'm trying to save your life. All your lives. I wish you'd understand.”

It moaned again, tilting its head towards its bulging stomach, as if it was trying to indicate the source of its pain.

All the cuddlies had protruding bellies, but this one was enormous. He placed a hand on the creature's abdomen and felt something moving. So that was why the cuddly hadn't gone to the funeral with the others. “Oh my God,” he said, turning towards the nearest lens. “I think it's in labour!”

The computer was silent.

“Help me!” Josh shouted. “What do I do?”

MR VINER, BEING PROGRAMMED WITH A WOMAN'S VOICE DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY CONFER A KNOWLEDGE OF MIDWIFERY. IN THIS SITUATION, I FEAR YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN.

“But what do I do? Boil some water?”

WHY NOT UNTIE HER? the computer suggested.

The cuddly hadn't tried to hurt herself since giving birth; Josh hoped it was a sense of responsibility for her babies that held her back, though he suspected it was merely exhaustion.

“You get some rest now,” he whispered, placing her three tiny offspring – Ben, Annie, and Tim – beside her in the sleep capsule, then gently draping a blanket across their furry bodies. “Goodnight, Mary Lou.”

MR VINER, the computer began one night about six months later, soon after Josh had finished telling the kids their bedtime story, I THINK WE NEED TO TALK.

“What's there to talk about?” Josh said. “I'm happy. For the first time in my life, I'm fully awake and I'm happy.”

MR VINER, I MUST REMIND YOU, THESE CREATURES ARE NOT YOUR FAMILY.

Ben's eyes were closed, but Josh could see his little ears twitching; he was listening. “Not in front of the children,” Josh hissed.

He crossed over to Ben's makeshift cot, pulling the blanket up over his shoulders. “Go to sleep, son,” he said, bending down to kiss him on the cheek.

MR VINER, YOU SEEM TO HAVE LOST ALL TOUCH WITH REALITY, the computer observed.

“You're jealous, aren't you? You think Mary Lou and the kids have taken your place. You think now I've got them, I don't need you any more! And guess what?” Josh pressed his face against the lens. “You're right!”

“Dad,” Ben said as they sat around the table for dinner one evening about two months before the colonists were due to arrive.

“Wait 'til your brother's finished saying grace,” Josh told him.

“Oh Lord make us truly grateful for the bounty we are about to receive,” Tim said. “Amen.”

“Amen,” Ben and Annie chorused.

Josh passed a bowlful of dry crackers to his oldest son. “Now what did you want to ask me?”

“Mom says you're an enemy to our people.”

Josh laughed and shook his head. The things kids came out with. “Now you know that isn't true,” he said, giving Mary Lou an exasperated look.

Mary Lou, tied to a chair next to the control panel, said nothing.

“But Mom says you're responsible for the deaths of thousands.”

“If they want to kill themselves, it's nothing to do

with me."

Mary Lou said something to Annie. Of all the kids, Annie was closest to her mother.

"Mom says you have no shame," Annie announced, reaching for another bowl of dry crackers, which she hand fed to her mother.

"It's not a matter of shame," Josh explained. "It's a matter of doing things differently. For example, where I come from, you don't drive away your enemies by killing yourself."

"You don't?" the kids chorused, wide-eyed.

"No, we don't."

"Then what do you do?" Ben asked.

Josh took a deep breath. All the months of teaching the young ones his language, getting them to bond with him, to trust him, had led up to this moment. Now he would tell them that humans didn't have enemies, they were friends to every living thing, and there would be more of these friends arriving soon. He would indoctrinate them with the New Edenist creed of live-and-let-live, then tell them to go out and convince the others to stop this madness of self-destruction. And for once, he thought, he really would be a hero.

"Well, son," Josh began, only to be interrupted by the computer.

MR VINER, I'M MONITORING SOME TRANSMISSIONS FROM EARTH.

"So? You're always doing that, aren't you?"

YES, BUT I THINK THIS IS ONE YOU SHOULD HEAR.

Josh made a face and winked at the kids. "All right, computer. Go ahead if it makes you happy."

NEWS REPORT: "Moonbase in chaos after latest round of fighting. Reports of widespread looting and thousands of unidentified dead. Headquarters of religious group due to embark for colony world said to have been destroyed by fire; survivors believed to have escaped on interstellar craft —"

"That's enough," Josh said, silencing the computer. He looked at his adopted family, the children staring up at him with their innocent eyes, their mother still making an occasional half-hearted attempt to bash her head against the control console. Who would be coming to join them in eight weeks' time? Had the gentle pacifists who'd employed him really managed to escape the destruction on Moonbase? Or someone else?

For the first time he considered the possibility that there might be more than one kind of hero. He took several sheets of paper and a pencil from a cupboard, then sat down to make several drawings. When he was finished he stood up, lifting Ben onto his shoulder, and crossed over to the window, looking out over the thousands of campfires burning in the night. These little creatures were smart; the young ones had picked up his language in no time. He hoped they would understand his drawings.

"I'm going to tell you something very important now, son. I want you to remember it, and then I want you to go out there and tell everyone else exactly what I said, you understand?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"The most important thing where I come from is self-preservation. You don't harm an enemy by killing

yourself, you harm them by staying alive. And you do that by killing them before they kill you. Now I want you to repeat that."

"Kill your enemy before they kill you."

Josh put the little cuddly down and handed him the drawings. "Show these to someone who will know how to use them," he said. Then he bent over to untie Mary Lou. "I want you to go now, kids, and tell everyone what I told you." The minute Mary Lou's hands were free, she started slapping herself across the face. "And take your mother with you."

"But I want to stay with you, Daddy," little Tim protested, wrapping his arms around one of Josh's legs.

"No, Tim, I want you to go with the others. And don't forget to practice your singing, okay?"

Ben took hold of Tim's hand, solemnly leading him towards the airlock.

"I don't understand," Annie wailed. "Why do you want us to go?"

"Because I love you," Josh said, kneeling down to look into her huge dark eyes.

"I still don't understand!"

"You will some day, I promise." He pressed the button to open the airlock and ushered them outside.

He watched from the window as Ben spoke to a couple of heavily-armed sentries.

That night he went to sleep for the last time, to dream about the other Mary Lou.

"What do you think?" he asked her as they rocked side by side on the porch. "Did I do the right thing?"

"You did what you had to," she said, taking his hand. And suddenly she was a young girl again, a scarlet ribbon in her long black hair.

They sat by the banks of a river, watching the sun rise, each knowing there would never be anyone else.

"It's time to go now," Mary Lou said as the sky began to brighten. "Are you ready?"

"As long as you're with me."

"I'll always be with you," she said, fading into transparency. "Always."

He opened his eyes.

MR VINER? WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP? I DIDN'T WAKE YOU.

"I know. I woke myself. How long have I been asleep this time?"

"Three weeks."

He started to pull himself up from the capsule.

I WOULDN'T LOOK OUTSIDE, MR VINER. THE SITUATION WOULD ONLY UPSET YOU.

Josh ignored the computer and walked over to the window. Something that looked a lot like a missile launcher was pointed directly at him.

"It's okay," he told the computer.

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Molly Brown, from Chicago but now resident in Surrey, has been a shoe-shine, a cabaret comedienne, a security guard, and a voice-over *artiste* for animated films. Her novel *Invitation to a Funeral*, an historical whodunnit, was published in 1995, and her most recent story here was "Community Service" (issue 107).

The dog gestured to me from across the tavern and finally I got up and went to his table. Dressed in a tweed suit, a plain shirt and tasteful tie, he was some kind of terrier. He opened his jaws in the semblance of a human grin, but rather than put me at my ease it chilled me to the marrow. I had never seen anything so terrifying. I tried to smile back.

"Pull up a stool," he said. What made it worse was, he didn't growl. He spoke with clear diction. "Sit down. You look as if you need a friend."

I didn't ask the dog its name. I'd already made that mistake once and been beaten for it. They told me that in this city the animals had no given names. It was humans who gave creatures personal names and to the animals here having a name was a symbol of slavery.

It was three weeks since I had arrived in the City of Beasts. I was weary with walking, ragged of mind. Naked and filthy, I'd slept in cobbled alleys, eaten rubbish from the gutter, tried to beg from passing sedan chairs containing arrogant creatures of all kinds: beasts wearing silk coats and dresses, goats, cats, dogs and foxes mostly.

The larger animals, like horses, could not of course be carried. They tended to live on the pale of the city in hovels with stable doors. I once saw a donkey sitting on the town hall steps smoking a pipe, but that was an unusual sight.

"Can you help me?" I croaked. "No one will help me. I don't know what I'm doing here. I don't know how I came to be here. Please, can you help me?"

"Calm down, calm down," he said, glancing around him. "You're attracting attention. Sit."

I did as he bid now, taking the stool. He signalled to the cat in the faded dress, the serving feline, and she brought two jugs of ale to the table. As always I was fascinated by the way she carried the tray and lifted the jugs. She was dexterous where she should not be. One of the reasons humans evolved into tool-makers and ruled the world was because of their prehensile hands. The thumb. The secret was supposed to be in the thumb. Yet she managed to carry the tray, lift the jugs, place them on the oak table.

"I think I can help you," said the dog in undertones. "Have you spoken to anyone else?"

The tavern was becoming riotous now, with drunken beasts slopping ale on the floor, some talking so loudly they were shouting, others displaying obnoxious behaviour. Two dogs in shirtsleeves were fighting in the corner, using their paws like fists, punching each other, kicking, but not using their teeth. A badger was encouraging them in their violence, hissing first at one to go in, then the other, delighted when blood was drawn.

"I've attempted to talk to other – other beasts," I replied in despair, "but no one seems to want to answer my questions. When I first arrived I tried to walk out of the city, but I kept finding myself back in the streets again."

The dog put a paw on the back of my hands and I felt the rough cloth of his jacket against my bare skin.

"Don't do that," he whispered. "Never do that. It's dangerous. You're in your own mind. If you try to go out of your mind, you'll end up insane. That's what it is, isn't it, insanity? Being out of your mind?"

The Council of Beasts

Garry Kilworth



"Yes," I replied bleakly, "but I don't understand."

"Don't worry. Look, I can get you in to see the Council of Beasts. They're the only ones who can really help you. What do you say? Would you like me to do that?"

The dog's brown eyes glittered in the lamplight. He stared into my face, his hot musty breath overpowering me. There was sweat dripping from his tongue onto my left leg, soiling my skin. I wanted to scream at him, hit him over the head with my ale jug, smash that look off his features, but I couldn't. He would have had me beaten into insensibility by those around us. They did that, when you angered them. They were basically savage creatures, who reacted instinctively.

When I had earlier seen a goat put on his hat, I knew I should have laughed – it was so absurd – but I gagged with horror, causing the goat to say, "What are you looking at?" in vicious accents, before shouldering past me.

I said to the dog, "Why? Why are you doing this?"

He drew back from me a little, looked somewhat hurt, and then replied, "I want to be your best friend."

If only there were other humans here, I should have someone with whom to talk this over. Just one other would have been enough. Perhaps between the two of us we could have worked out some reason for it all? But so far as I knew, I was the only member of *homo sapiens* in the city.

It was not so much that I was hunted down, or even openly reviled, but I was *here*. Yes, I had been treated with contempt, forced to eat from the gutter, made to sleep in filthy corners, but this was more a matter of neglect than open hostility. No one cared about me. They lived their lives around me, their indifference to my suffering hurtful, but there was no positive attempt to degrade or physically harm me.

"Do you want to come home with me for the night?" asked the dog. "I can find you a place to sleep."

I nodded, all my pride gone.



When we left the tavern, I went out first, and two footpads carrying cudgels – dogs by the look of them under the lamplight – crossed the street towards me. However, when they saw my terrier they dropped their eyes and changed the direction of their walk. Soon they had gone down one of the slick black alleys which led to the river, where they could ply their trade in the fog.

"You see," said the terrier, patting a bulge in his waistcoat pocket. "You have me to thank for your safety. Or rather my position as a Constable of the Watch. Did I not mention that to you? Well then, we have known each other for such a short period of time."

He led me to a modest town house in the area of the prison and unlocked the door with a huge iron key. Inside the rooms were not unfriendly but sparsely furnished. I wondered what I had let myself in for, but the terrier did not seem overly interested in me except to see me bedded down in a corner of the kitchen, just behind the stove, on warm flags.

I pulled the ragged blanket over my head, hoping as always when I fell asleep that I should awake in a morning where the nightmare had gone. It was a hope which was never fulfilled, but I still nurtured it. This

city, peopled by beasts in clothes, was a horrible dream. It seemed to me as if there were something I had to remember, which would be the key to my escape but since I did not have an inkling of what it was I could do no more than pray some revelation would come to me.

The dog had mentioned the Council of Beasts.

Perhaps they could help me?

"It's funny," said the terrier, as he left the kitchen with a lighted candle, "we used to be under your domination. Now you look to me for sustenance, shelter, comfort. Our roles have been reversed. I find that funny, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. "Most peculiar."

"And funny," he said, leaving me.



The next day he took me to the town hall, in the cobbled square. It was a Gothic building, with round turrets, spires and narrow windows. Shadows lurked in the corners of its deep sills and arches. The windows were filthy. A trail of dung led from the great doorway, out into the square, where it filled the cracks between the cobbles. On a hot day this square stank of drying straw and animal droppings. There was a pile of steaming hay in the hallway as we entered, whose damp heart must surely have been about to combust.

"Up the stairs," said the terrier. "Our appointment is for noon."

That could have meant just about any time between eight o'clock in the morning and mid-afternoon. Since there were no clocks here it was immaterial. The beasts only had four times – midnight, dawn, noon and dusk. They had no need of exacting seconds, minutes or hours. Midnight was the most flexible, since there was nothing to mark it except perhaps a vague knowledge of where the moon and stars should be at such a time.

We sat on a long wooden bench outside a set of tall narrow doors which rose to three times my height. On the bench there was a goat, three pigs all in open-necked shirts with dirty collars, a fox and several rats. It seemed they were all waiting to get in to see the council.

I sat next to the goat in the torn cloak who was chewing a wad of hay the whole time, occasionally spitting the juice across the corridor at the wall opposite, where it dribbled down to the skirting beneath. Once or twice he inclined his head to stare at me curiously, but said nothing.

The pigs were talking in low, urgent voices together, as if they were concocting some story on which they had to be consistent and word perfect. Occasionally their mumblings were audible, so that I caught a partial sentence.

"...so then *you* say," murmured the saddleback hog, "I have no need of a third of a whole acre..."

The rats remained nervously quiet, not looking at each other, scratching themselves impatiently.

Suddenly the doors to the council chamber flew open and a small dog appeared.

"The visitor!" he called.

The terrier nudged me and I got to my feet. On the bench there was some shuffling of hooves and paws,

and mutterings about jumping the queue. These I ignored as I entered the large council room. On the way across the bare floor I passed a dejected-looking poodle who gave me such a look of disgust I felt that whatever his petition had been, he blamed me for its failure. Since he no doubt had to blame *someone* I was as good a choice as any. The doors were closed behind him.

I was invited to sit in a wheel-backed chair before a great mahogany desk. I stared around the room. It looked much like the council chamber in my own town hall, back in the real world. Behind the desk, piled with papers and books, ink and quills, was a goat in a stiff, high collar and a cat in a creased blue dress. They were attended by two dogs in black suits. There seemed to be much conferring between the dogs as they put various papers before the two judges, but none between the goat and cat themselves. Eventually the cat looked up over the top of her metal-rimmed spectacles.

"You wish to return to your own city?" she said. "Is that correct?"

"Yes, er, ma'am," I mumbled.

"Cat, not *ma'am*," she corrected me.

"Yes, cat. This dog here..."

She stared at the terrier in an unblinking fashion.

"Your counsel, yes. Have you come to an arrangement for his services?"

I felt the flutterings of uncertainty in my breast.

"Arrangement?"

"Yes, has he made his terms known to you?"

The terrier said, "No – not yet." He turned to me and said, "You must take care of one of my kind, my breed, when you go back."

"Anything," I said, desperate to be home again.

"It doesn't have to be you. Just make sure a terrier gets a good home. Do you agree?"

It seemed simple enough. "Yes."

"Good," said the goat, speaking for the first time.

"Now, you were brought here for... hmmmm," he studied a piece of paper in his hoof. "Yes, the assassination." He stared at me hard. "You must promise, you see, to kill someone when we allow you to go back."

"Kill someone?" I faltered, horrified.

"Yes," said the cat. "There is a man who has been responsible for a lot of cruelty – animals have suffered terribly under his hand. He is called..." and she gave me the name of a well-known pharmaceuticals manufacturer about whom I had read in the newspapers. His laboratories were infamous and the experiments there carried out in the name of society's need for advancements in medicine were apparently abominable.

"I have to shoot him?" I queried, my mind spinning with the thought.

"Shoot him, stab him, suffocate him, poison him – we do not care. The method of the murder is left up to you. What must happen is the man must die by your hand. Otherwise, you will remain here for the rest of your days."

"There are no other choices?" I cried, in despair.

"None."

"I see," I said, looking down.

"You will of course," remarked the goat in rather ponderous tones, "receive the city's highest reward possible – once the deed has been performed to our satisfaction."

"What is the nature of the reward?"

"It will be your action which will decide *that*," said the cat. "You will determine your own reward."

Finally, I agreed to their terms, and the next morning found myself back in the real world.



Now when one has undergone such an experience, one is naturally shaken at first. One wakes, in one's own sweaty bed, thankful the nightmare is at an end. One looks back on the horrible events in one's dream and makes resolutions.

"I shall be a better person in the future. I shall be careful of making judgements on my fellow creatures. I shall not be hasty in my actions."

Trembling and physically exhausted from the night's happenings, I rose and made a cup of tea. I sat in the bleak grey rays of dawn and drank the same, wondering if I would keep my promise to the terrier in my dream. In the end it made sense that I should, if only for my own peace of mind. There was a nephew who had requested a dog. I would purchase him the self-same breed as the hound which had acted for me in the matter concerning the Council of Beasts.

This I did, but also visited a psychiatrist, who gave me due warning of what was to come. His name was given me by a friend, a politician whose acquaintance I had recently made by chance. This man recommended the doctor as being one of the foremost authorities on displaced states of mind.

"He won't laugh at me?" I said.

"Not at all," said my political friend. "He is thoroughly professional concerning such matters and treats them with all proper seriousness."

Fortunately, the doctor lived in the district. It was a short walk from the politician's house to the psychiatrist's door. In my anxious state my steps were quick and eager. On being admitted I fairly flew through the hallway and into the office dominated by a brown leather couch. I lay on this item of furniture, conscious of it once having been a bull.

"These things usually come in threes," said the doctor, on hearing my confession. "I don't know why, something to do with the brain's obsession with that number. You will no doubt return to this strange kingdom of the mind, where beasts rule over mankind, and there have to account for yourself again."

I had told him nothing about the man I was supposed to kill, only that the beasts had demanded kindness and consideration from me in future years as payment for my escape.

"Is there nothing you can give me, which will forestall such a return to that state?"

"I can give you medication, drugs, but these will only work in the short term. Once you stop taking them, you will experience the illness again – probably. I'm not saying it's certain. Nothing is certain in this business. However, I would be very surprised if you went back to this dream world of yours. Perhaps another, but not the same one."

I agreed not to take any medication, though I was very frightened of having another breakdown. On the way out of the doctor's office I walked more slowly than

when I had entered. In this more casual frame of mind I noticed a print on the hallway wall. It said it was "From a painting by Cornelis Saftleven (1607-1681) called *The Council of Beasts* (Prague Museum of Art)." It had strangely clothed animals standing or sitting in groups – a goat, standing upper centre-left side, a cat sitting lower right side, both attended by dogs.

I went straight back into his office, almost hysterical, and demanded to know why he had not mentioned this picture to me. The doctor looked acutely surprised and told me he had forgotten he had it. "It's been on the wall for so long, perhaps 30 years. I've stopped looking at it. I didn't even recall its content when we were talking about your dream. You know, it's like the wallpaper, after a while it blends into the wall itself, becomes a blank in your mind, even when you spend eight or nine hours a day in its company. Do you understand?"

I tried to recall the wall-covering on the living-room of my grandparents' house – and failed – even though I had been raised in that house.

"Tell me one thing?" I asked. "Have I been here before?"

The doctor put his thumbs in his waistcoat and stared at me hard in the face.

"Not that I recall. Your name is not on my register. But I have been practising for three decades and have not always been as careful with my paperwork as I must be these days. Can *you* ever remember coming to see me?"

"No," I croaked. "I have no such recollection."

"Then let us say this was your first visit."

I begged the doctor's forgiveness and left the premises. On my way past the picture, I averted my face, not wishing to be reminded of my terrible ordeal.



Three months passed before I once again found myself in the City of Beasts. The terrier was waiting for me. He led me to the council room, where they were waiting for me. This time I noticed that although the beasts walked upright and talked like humans, they wore no clothes. They did not smoke pipes, nor play flutes, nor drink ale. They were closer to beasts than they had been on my first incarceration.

"Have you killed him yet?" bleated the goat.

"No," I admitted. "I didn't think you were real – I thought you were all from a dream."

"Don't make that mistake again," hissed the cat, and she drew a set of claws across my forearm, scratching me deeply.

This time, when I returned to my own world, I found myself on a park bench. It occurred to me that I had dozed off in the warm sun. I immediately inspected my arm and found blood. The skin was scored where the cat had scratched me. It took me half an hour to run all the way to my psychiatrist.

"Are you sure you haven't come into contact with a local cat?" he asked, as his receptionist dressed my wound. "What about a stray in the park? Some feral animal that might have attacked you while you slept? Or perhaps it's not a cat-scratch at all? Maybe you caught yourself on some barbed wire...?"

This time he was not so convincing. It was as if my

stories were changing *his* beliefs. He asked me questions about the City of Beasts in a way that made it seem as if he were satisfying his own curiosity about an exotic land he would never be able to visit, like tenth-century Africa, or medieval Japan. Far from attempting to assure me that I was merely ill, and could be cured, he seemed intrigued by my adventures.

"What am I to do?" I asked him. "You told me I would not ever return to that place."

"I said I would be surprised if you did – and I am."

When I left his office I glanced up at the picture in the hallway. It had been changed. There was now an innocuous woodland scene, a shady path through a rough avenue of trees at the end of which was a shining lake. At least, it seemed innocent enough until I studied it more closely, and then it seemed to me that some of the shadows formed faces, and bodies, and were in fact animals hiding amongst the trees, waiting for someone to pass by the spot. Were they about to ambush a victim? That's what it looked like to my eye.

This time I did not return to the office to confront the doctor, but hurried away, anxious to get home and among familiar surroundings. That night the wound on my arm pulsed and throbbed. I hoped it would not make me sick and put me into a fever. I was afraid of what might happen if my mind were in febrile state. While my head was clear and open, I could deal with this terrible ordeal, but I did not trust myself to remain sane were I to go into the drugged half-sleep that fever brings.



Another month passed, during which I did little but wait anxiously for any sign of the animals. In that time I went through the motions of researching my potential victim, just in case I was being watched. I discovered his whereabouts, his family circumstances and his habits.

He was a relatively young married man, with two small children. He lived in Shooter's Hill and actually walked to work each day across Eltham Common to his company's head office on Rochester Way. His morning walk was early – he began it at seven-thirty – and I saw possibilities in this walk should I ever have to carry out the deed.

Of course, I never expected to do that, but just when I thought I was rid of the nightmare, I once again found myself among those grotesque creatures in their city. This time they were not only without clothes, but on all fours. When I stood before the council, they were in a bare room, without furniture, and stood before me like a domestic farmyard group.

"Have you killed him yet?" whined the cat.

"No," I moaned. "I cannot."

"You *must*," she screeched.

I found myself in a department store, walking around as if in a dream, staring at leather coats and handbags. An assistant asked me if I was all right. She took me to a staff room where they gave me a cup of tea and a biscuit. Eventually I made my way back to the street, but I felt sick inside.

This time I did not go to the psychiatrist. It had occurred to me that the attacks were becoming less surreal. That is to say the animal world was becoming

more like the actual world with every visit. In the City of Beasts they now looked like animals and walked like animals. It was only in their speech that they became preternatural and even that was changing. I decided that the next time I visited them they would be in some meadow, surrounded by wildflowers and hedgerows, making animal noises. I felt no desperate urge to carry out their command, since here I could not be touched. All I had to do was keep making promises until they went away.

That was before I visited my nephew.



Peter, 14 years of age, met me at the station and carried my bags to the taxi.

"I'm glad you came to us, uncle," he said. "Mother was beginning to remark on how down you have sounded on the phone lately." His mother was my sister Alice.

"How's Toby?" I asked, enquiring after the terrier I had bought him. "Still boisterous?"

"Oh yes, you know how silly terriers can get, uncle."

Toby met us at the garden gate and leapt up and down in the excited way that terriers do. I threw a chewed tennis ball for him, already sodden with saliva, mentally grimacing and wanting to wash my hands immediately. He brought it back instantly, putting in front of me and looking up eagerly, yapping when I ignored the offer to continue the game.

Alice fed me and I went to bed early. I woke the next morning feeling remarkably refreshed. Alice and Peter had to go into town, to get Peter some shoes, and I was left sitting in a deck chair in the garden, soaking in the country ambience. I guessed Toby would be bothersome, but I actually did not see him until he came sidling round the corner of the cottage close to noon. He came round to the front of me and sat on the lawn, his head on one side, his mouth partly open. He was panting as if he had been running from a distant place.

I felt it best to ignore him and continued reading the paper which had been delivered shortly before.

After a while he was so quiet I thought he had gone away, but when I slowly lowered the newspaper, he was staring up at me. There was such a look of malevolence on his canine features I started backwards and let out a little cry. He continued to glare at me, ferociously. Then just as Alice and Peter came in view, walking up the lane, he spoke.

"When are you going to kill him?" he growled, quietly.

My worst nightmare was beginning to materialize. The beasts were able to get at me in the real world. They were penetrating what I believed to be a safe haven – sanctuary – and I knew then that I would never be let alone until I did as I had been ordered to do. It was true, I had no choice. The council had known that from the start and had told me so.

That weekend, in the peaceful atmosphere of the cottage, I devised a scheme to murder the pharmaceutical manufacturer. I have always been a meticulous planner and I doubt anyone could have faulted my detail. I was to follow him one morning from his home to his office and on the way push him under a bus. It was a simple but I hoped effective plan.



A week later, in the early dawn, I stalked the victim from his house, tracking him across the common. While he was waiting to cross Rochester Way, busy even at that time of the morning, I bent down as if pretending to tie a loose shoelace and butted him hard in the back with my head. The blow sent him flying out into the traffic. He was hit first by one car, then another from the opposite direction.

Tossed into the air like a run-over rabbit, he landed almost at my feet again. His bloody face stared up at me with surprise on his features. It was certain he was dead.

I hurried away from the scene, hoping my part in his death had not been noticed. My suitcase was ready in a locker at the train station and I went there immediately. I caught a train to my sister's house. Toby was there, waiting at the gate for me when I arrived at dusk. I looked him directly in the eye.

"It's done," I said.

He did not reply, but merely seemed eager for me to throw his damned ball for him. I did it to get rid of him while I entered the garden, actually feeling less revulsion for his toy than I had the first time. Later I caught him staring at me, as I moved around the house, in a quiet, understanding way.

Nothing happened for a few days. Then at dusk one evening I was trying to watch television, but was experiencing difficulty in focusing. I could hear the words plainly enough though and I recognized the voice of my politician friend. It seemed that he had been for a long time an executive on the board of a pharmaceuticals company. He was holding forth to the correspondent on the terrible circumstances of the death of the firm's late chairman. My acquaintance said he was preparing to leave politics to become the new chairman of that company, to fill the void which the tragedy had left.

"What a remarkable coincidence," I said to Toby. "I had no idea of a connection there – had you?"

Toby refrained from answering me, possibly because there were other humans in the house, but I knew what he was thinking.

"I expect," I said, "we might have to do something about the new chairman, too? And we mustn't forget the psychiatrist. My sessions with him are supposed to be all strictly confidential, but really, he knows far too much..."



At midnight, just after the church clock had struck ten, I discovered the nature of my reward from the Council of Beasts. As I took off my shoes and socks I noticed that my feet had begun to shrink and harden. I stood up quickly and stared into the dressing-table mirror. The pupils of my eyes were no longer round, but were vertical ellipses. On top of my head two small bumps were beginning to poke through my scalp.

I turned to Toby, sitting in the doorway.

"Maaaahhhh," I said to him. "Maaaaahhhhhhhh..." Toby smiled.

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THE ZZZ RO T A O P O P

Nick Lowe

Coincidence or conspiracy? No Philip K. Dick film has yet been directed by an American. It may not mean a thing; but Christian Duguay's *Screamers* makes a powerful witness for the case that the things that make Dick compelling are precisely those that are fundamentally subversive of the Hollywood narrative. *Screamers* is as far from Hollywood as you can get and still masquerade as a mainstream genre spectacle: a little Canadian film, made with cable money, from a Dan O'Bannon script based (like his *Total Recall*) on another of Dick's landmark early shorts. "Second Variety" is the one (does anybody need to be told this?) set in the global no-man's-land of an earth devastated and irradiated by WWII, its civilian population wiped out, while the governments and military command have decamped to the moon, abandoning the planet and its now-unwinnable war to the hapless, demoralized troops, dug into their bunkers in a bleak trench warfare punctuated only by the invention of deadlier and wilier anti-personnel devices.

Dick's novelette centres on the discovery that the intelligent mines are starting to redesign themselves, to evolve, and to develop a battle plan of their own that involves the elimination of both sides, mimicking human form to get inside the fortress bunkers. Variety One does a lethally credible version of a wounded soldier; Variety Three, as the hero discovers on a perilous journey behind enemy lines to follow up a truce offer that may or may not be a trap, mimics an orphaned child. But what is Variety Two? Who can the hero trust, out of the variously plausible characters he meets on his desperate mission to warn the last remnants of humanity of their threatened extinction? Which are human, and which are death machines disguised as human? This being vintage PKD, he gets it horribly wrong, and the Second Variety escapes to the moon to infect the last human remnant with its lethal self-replicating simulacra. The text ends with the grim consolation that the Second Variety itself has already fallen from grace, its human mimicry all too effective: "They were already beginning to design weapons to use against one another."

This astonishing work, written in the summer of 1952 by the 24-year-old Dick within weeks of his first publication, was the text in which many of its author's trademark themes (humans and ringers, escalating metaphysical instabilities, ironic struggles between unseen puppeteers with baffled little people caught in the middle) came together for the first time. Yet nearly half a century on, its preoccupation with intelligent

weapons, minefield warfare, and military technology as virus seem uncannily current. Aside from the explicitly cold-war setting, it would be a hard story to put any kind of date to, though it's easy (probably much too easy) to construe as a product of the age of McCarthy and Korea. *Screamers* evidently feels this acutely, and makes rather heavy weather of trying to update the east/west enmities: recasting them feebly as yet another meaningless struggle between an interplanetary mining corporation (Them) and someone called "The Alliance" (Us, apparently), and most regrettably moving the war to "Sirius 3B" (or was it "Titan 4"? I got lost). But for reasons that will emerge, even this creaky setup turns out, through its very creakiness, to serve a very singular movie rather well.

It needs saying right off that, in contrast to earlier Dick outings on film, *Screamers* is by no means a well-made movie. Some of this is frankly budgetary: it's a film with as many scenes as possible set in quarries or in alien locations that can look like northern Quebec; in which the director is also the camera operator, the blue-screened exteriors look like a feature-length advert for KPT Bryce 1.0 and are always seen from the same angle, and the credits include one for "Script Typist" (which seems more telling the more you think about it). But it's also a film with one of those incomprehensible pre-credit scrolling expositions featuring the words "2078," "Corporation," and "berynium"; with an easy-to-find switch in the blackout scene labelled AUXILIARY POWER SWITCH; with undefended sewerways leading to the heart of the impregnable fortress ("This leads to the maintenance tunnel underneath the command bunker!"); with scanners run over the scene of a disaster reading BIO LIFE SIGNS NEGATIVE; with a bad rock song by a female Canadian singer you've never heard of; with big, hard stools of exposition passed by looping them on long-shots of two characters tramping across locations under brooding soundtrack strings (General MIDI patch _50); with a plutonium warhead that throws the heroes backwards on detonation, shaken but whole (you've got to be careful with that plutonium, it goes up just like gasoline); and with dialogue that includes the lines "No matter how many times I see that, I get sick," "Real scotch - no synthetic shit," "We all die alone, Joe," and "We've got about eight minutes" (why then, that's just enough time for one more twist, set piece, and seconds-to-spare escape). What's striking, though, is how little any of this matters, any more than the erratic pacing, all-expense-spared casting - though

Peter Weller, taking his slide down the B-list with dignity and grace, is as professional and value-giving as ever – and often pointless or incomprehensible plotting, with its overdose of lines like “What are we doing? What in God’s name are we doing?” and “What the hell is going on around here anyway?” For what makes the cheaply-made, dismally-titled, sometimes ineptly-directed *Screamers* an unexpectedly thrilling view, and easily the most authentic yet of the PKD films, is its transcription to cinema of the definitive Dick experience. As in *Total Recall*, O’Bannon’s genuine feeling for PKD transcends his own limitations – pulpy characterizations and dialogue, reflex genre plotting and weakness for splatter, to most of which Dick himself was in any case susceptible without embarrassment. The opening set-piece, for example – in which a lone runner is messily diced by the eponymous mobile mines, dark cousins of Michael Bentine’s Potty Time – looks like a slab of gratuitous slash spectacle, but is actually one of several scenes that transcribe Dick’s original pages with considerable fidelity. And even the new material is at times impressively true to the spirit, with little inserted throwaways so utterly Dickian that you start to wonder if they’re real, cannibalized from other PKD stories you might once have read or dreamed. “I can’t believe,” protests the rookie on being offered an anti-radiation cigarette (more 60s Dick than 50s, I feel, but a wonderfully authentic invention all the same), “you have to put this shit in your lungs just to neutralize the shit in your lungs.”

But it goes much deeper than that. The more mechanical the film gets, the more it invites distrust, its unintelligent genre clichés excused by their pervasive deconstruction as the foundations of reality and narrative crumble around them. As the film progresses, a parade of sf-movie formulae are explosively dismantled (including the canonical wide-eyed orphan with soft toy); and after the first half-hour, interesting but leisurely, of mostly-baffling future conspiracy politics you rapidly reach the point where nobody and nothing can be trusted – where you genuinely can’t tell which of the mechanical characters, set pieces, plot devices, and dialogue are movie simulations of humans and which are movie robots simulating the simulations. By mid-picture a standard-set core team has been assembled consisting of the gravelly-charismatic one (Weller), the jumpy one, the psychotic one, the rookie one and the woefully ill-explained babe (Jennifer Rubin, who does a passable Sharon Stone in a

balaclava). One of these gets wasted by a comrade because “He kept saying the same thing,” but uh-oh! boo-boo! turns out he’s not an android at all, but just a very underwritten character. But what, then, about the one who keeps quoting random chunks of Shakespeare instead of saying stuff that means anything? Wouldn’t that be a great way to pass the movie-character Turing test without having to master actual dialogue? What about the babe, who within five minutes of meeting our hero has offered him a drink, bummed a smoke and let him light it, and then taken her blouse off? Above all, what about Weller’s own character, the one player elaborately set up with memories, experience, feelings, and culture (first sighted flipping a Roman coin while listening to Mozart), yet at the same time the one character who is pointedly never seen to bleed? – the plot’s diagnostic sign of humanity in other cases, though typically this in turn proves a false clue. Is there, in fact, any other conceivable resolution to such an archetypal PKD narrative than that the robo-hunting hero should find that he himself is the machine?

For what it’s worth, it actually becomes clear quite early, should you happen to remember the twists in the original story, that *Screamers*’ final answer to the enigma is not, in fact, going to be the same as Dick’s, though it comes as no surprise that of the five principal characters not more than one, whether human or android, is left alive in the final shot – which itself plays knowingly with the end of O’Bannon’s own *Alien*, on which it works a cheap and nasty twist. But by this stage the audience have long been way ahead, questioning anything and everything they see on screen whether the film invites them to or not, and projecting twists and revelations that can’t possibly all fit into the space of a single film. I’m not giving anything much away if I say that in both story and film the gap between Varieties 1 and 3 is a clever piece of misdirection, and the real revelation is that there are already higher-numbered Varieties loose in the story. That being so, who’s to say that any of the characters are human? Has the planet passed entirely to a population of android bombs, some or all of which believe themselves to be human beings with human pasts and personalities? Come to that, and given that all orders are routinely suspected to be tricks by the other side impersonating one’s own unseen commanders, who’s to say the war is a real war, that the commanders exist at all (we see one, in a VR transmission that later turns out a fake), or that the planet they inhabit is the one they’ve all been told it is?



Phillip K. Dick

Does earth still exist? Does *anything* exist?

Screamers makes its own, inevitably arbitrary and disappointing, selection from this highly user-extensible menu, inverting some elements of Dick’s own ending and unwisely attempting to improve others, while adding a couple of extra twists of doubtful taste and plausibility. But the point is that by the time we reach the end it really doesn’t matter how it ends: who gets home, whether the earth is saved, whether anything was ever at stake in the first place. The end of *Total Recall* flirted tentatively with this kind of effect, but backed off from its fundamentally anti-genre, anti-closural, anti-Hollywood, anti-narrative implications. In *Screamers*, a film whose retail-premiere title and unfashionably interplanetary story make it a surprising choice for theatrical release at all, there’s less to lose and more to gain. It’s nothing like as clever a film as it could be, and the ending in particular lacks the final ironic whammy the material demands. But the pleasure of *Screamers* is that you don’t have to be clever to pass for human, and as in Dick’s own writing the pulp isn’t always easily to separate from the juice. **Nick Lowe**



Lucifer's Comet

Francis Amery

Richard Halley's only son was born in 1986, the year that Halley's Comet made its much-anticipated seventh passage through the inner solar system. It seemed only natural that he should name his son Edmond by way of acknowledgment, although he had not the slightest idea whether his own forefathers shared a common line of descent with the famous astronomer. It seemed only natural, too, that he should do everything he could to make his young son proud of the name that he bore.

As an infant, Edmond slept in a room whose walls and ceiling were lit by phosphorescent stars, arranged with great care to duplicate the form of the constellations – constellations that were then hardly ever visible through the polluted air of Greenwich. As a youth, he received a series of telescopes and other astronomical aids for his birthdays and was taken on family holidays to places where the air was clear and the stars shone in all their glory. As a young man he was given virtual-reality links to the produce of every new space telescope launched into orbit. It often seemed that the only authentic conversations he ever had with his anxious and introverted father all began with the words: "Look up there, Edmond – do you see...?"

His mother called him Eddie but to his father he was always Edmond.

In view of these formative experiences it is not entirely surprising that Edmond's greatest dream and only ambition was to discover a new comet of unparalleled brilliance. The one named after his namesake was, of course, due to return again in 2062 but he knew that it would be a mere shadow of its former self. Indeed, when he took up the science of astronomy in earnest he soon learned that its appearance at the time of his birth had been something of a disappointment to its patient anticipators. The world had hoped for a fine display, but it had been presented with an object hardly visible to the naked eye, of a luminosity so poor as to be almost negligible. That became the only fear shadowing his ambition: that he too might be a failure, not bright enough even to be evident to an

untutored eye.

He was, at any rate, successful enough in his studies to be head-hunted to the USA and appointed to the team analysing data from the first telescope erected on the dark side of the moon: a perfect vantage-point from which to scan the sky for comets. He was also lucky enough to catch the tail end of a wave of fashionability which attributed some practical value to his mission; the brief upsurge of Millennial fever which had passed while he was still adolescent left in its wake a genuine anxiety about the possibility that the Earth might be struck at any time by an object big enough to wipe out half or three-quarters of all the species living on its surface.

Once he was a professional astronomer, of course, Edmond's surname began to seem more like a joke than a celebration. In order to differentiate himself from his predecessor he took to signing himself Edmond L. Halley, and if he were asked what the L stood for he would say "Lucifer." That was his own little joke, because Lucifer meant "light-bringer" and thus expressed – in a subtle and scrupulously unserious fashion – the hope that a comet might one day come his way that would put his namesake's shabby relic to shame.

After a few years, Edmond decided to be more assertive in making demands of fate and he changed his signature to E. Lucifer Halley. When a few years more had passed – by which time his father had died of skin cancer – he dropped the family name altogether and became Edmond Lucifer, thus ensuring that if and when he did discover the comet that would make his name famous it would be universally recognized as his comet, and not merely the second in a string founded by someone else.

"If that's what you want, Eddie," his mother said, when he told her of this decision. Her maiden name had been Rowbotham, and she'd been very glad to have the opportunity to change it to something more fitting.

It wasn't necessary for Edmond to go to the moon in order to work with the Darkside Reflector. The relay-system which brought the data back was complicated, but it had been very well designed. He could slip on a VR hood anywhere in the world and see exactly what the Darkside Reflector was seeing, although there wasn't actually much point in doing that because the team had a Cray to crunch all the numbers and turn the data into more manageable formats. For reasons of propriety, however, he chose to live as far away from the nearest city as he could possibly contrive. Even way out in the wilderness there was an unhealthy measure of atmospheric pollution blurring the scintillant halo of the Milky Way, but he liked the heat and the aridity of the desert and he soon educated himself to like the loneliness. He lived as an astronomer ought to live, with the stars and planets for his dearest and most intimate companions.

The first half-dozen new comets that the Darkside Reflector detected were mere minnows and Edmond declined the opportunity to have his name attached to any of them. His fellows made a joke of the fact that he was waiting for the big one, but he didn't mind – even a joke carried an implication of consent. He knew that he had to wait for the right comet, and he also knew that when it came he would be able to claim it. It would be his turn, his prerogative, his *destiny*.

According to the proverb, all things come to he who waits. Although proverbial wisdom is not entirely to be trusted, it proved its worth in this particular instance. When Edmond had waited long enough, the comet came. When he telephoned home to tell his mother the good news, she was delighted.

"That's marvellous, Eddie," she said. "Your father would have been so proud of you."

The Cray soon calculated that Lucifer's Comet was the biggest that had ever been named; it promised to be the brightest ever to appear in the sky while human observers had been around to marvel. It was a mere dot when the Darkside Reflector first registered its existence, and it was still a mere dot when Edmond Lucifer reported the discovery to the world, but the potential brightness of the object would probably have dented the world's indifference even without the Cray's careful computation of its orbit. As things turned out, though, the computation added considerably to the publicity which the comet attracted.

The Cray's calculations declared that Lucifer's Comet would cross the earth's orbit less than 20,000 miles away from the planet's position. From the moment this datum was first published, a few frightened individuals began to wonder publicly whether the computer might be wrong and – if so – by how much. Their fear was not taken seriously at first, but it proved infectious, and the wider it spread the greater its intensity grew.

Scientists and mathematicians immediately began to appear on current-affairs programmes broadcast by TV stations all over the world, assuring the public that the information gathered by the Darkside Reflector was very accurate indeed, and that the calculations left hardly any margin for error. Expert after expert assured their constituencies that Lucifer's Comet

would pass spectacularly but harmlessly by, and that everyone in the world would be free to enjoy the magnificent show it would put on.

Proudly and patiently, the world's astronomers explained to the public that Lucifer's Comet was a ball of mixed ices larger than any that had come tumbling towards the sun since human beings first turned curious eyes to the firmament of stars, and that those ices would sublimate in magnificent profusion to paint a beckoning finger across the face of Creation. Soon, they said, the comet would begin to grow a tail – and what a tail it would grow!

The astronomer who waxed most lyrical about this prospect was, of course, Edmond Lucifer, the bringer of light whose name the comet bore.

The fact that the scientists and mathematicians were absolutely certain that the comet wouldn't hit the Earth didn't stop people worrying. Ordinary people had never trusted scientists and mathematicians – or, for that matter, science and mathematics – and die-hard alarmists continued to raise disturbing questions.

What if the comet were deflected from its present course by the gravity of a planet or an asteroid?

What if the sublimation of its ices caused the comet to break up in an ungente fashion, so that the fragments began to follow different and deadlier trajectories?

Called upon to answer these questions, Edmond Lucifer and his colleagues had to admit that such possibilities could not entirely be ruled out. Their tentative *caveats* about the slight possibility of their calculations being disturbed by some unexpected event was widely taken as a licence to be terrified – and the name of the comet quickly began to take on a very different significance.

All over the Earth people began talking of the object – which was still invisible to the earthbound naked eye – as the Devil's Comet.

The discoverer of the comet discovered to his chagrin that in times of great stress – and the 21st century was, in many ways that had nothing whatsoever to do with astronomy, a time of almost unbearable stress – civilized people were just as inclined as their barbarous forbears to blame messengers for the quality of the news that they brought. Edmond had thought of himself as a bringer of wonderful news, but there were many who took leave to disagree with him outspokenly, and their numbers grew rapidly as the anxiety spread.

Alas, the name which Edmond had chosen to distinguish himself from his illustrious forbear was ready-made to become a focus of near-universal alarm. It began to be rumoured that he had changed his name for the most sinister of reasons, and that he was indeed a secret disciple of Satan, perhaps the anti-Christ himself. Even among the atheistic ranks of professional scientists the name Lucifer began to be spoken with a condescending sneer or frank disapproval. The great majority of the experts who undertook to appear on TV to reassure the world that all was well and that the Earth was perfectly safe began to take great care to distance themselves from the man for whom the comet was named.

"He was not its real discoverer," these pundits hastened to say. "He was merely one member of a team, and it happened to be his turn to attach his name to the object – which he was allowed to do as a mere matter of courtesy. The vanity which prompted him to refuse to let the comet be known by his real surname, on the grounds that it had been attached to a comet before, is of course something ill-befitting a true scientist. The perversity which guided his choice of pseudonym is more ill-befitting still."

Edmond protested his innocence in vain; he was damned by the public and his fellow professionals alike.

"Don't listen to them, Eddie," his mother said, when he complained of the injustice. "They're just jealous. Mind you, you *could* have called it Rowbotham's comet, if you'd wanted to."

Edmond's colleagues on the Darkside Reflector project expressed their solidarity at first, but rapidly changed their minds when the anxious publicity grew more intense. They tried to change the comet's name, insisting that its "real" name was and always had been DR3-C41, but they were far too late. Lucifer's Comet it was, in the eyes of the world, and Lucifer's Comet – or the Devil's Comet – it would remain.

The agency administering the Darkside Reflector dismissed Edmond from his post – with not a whimper of protest from any of his former colleagues – but that made no difference to the public's perception of the project. Nor did it make a difference to the increasingly hateful popular perception of poor Edmond, who had to give up trying to justify or explain himself in the media because of the naked hostility generated by his every appearance in public.

By the time the comet was clearly visible in the night sky – to desert-dwellers if not to city folk – Edmond Lucifer's adopted name had become an object of dread.

One night, while sitting alone at the window of his desert home, Edmond realized that in coming true his great ambition had destroyed him – that his triumph was a mockery, and that his future was irredeemably bleak. The quiet light of the stars which shone so brightly above him was suddenly transformed in his disillusioned sight from a wonderful and loving radiance into a stern and malevolent glare.

He had no difficulty at all in picking out the faint dot that was Lucifer's Comet, nor in perceiving mockery and menace in its glitter.

"Curse you!" he screamed, although no one could hear him. "Damn you to Hell! I wish you *would* break up, and shower the Earth with a thousand deadly meteorites!"

The curse was, of course, utterly impotent. The Cray hooked up to the Darkside Reflector dutifully calculated, in its patient fashion, that the comet had actually exploded at least 30 minutes before Edmond spoke these fateful words – but he took no comfort from the calculation, which he had to find in the pages of the press just like any other fearful follower of the world's implacable progress.

"Is the world going to end, Eddie?" his mother asked him, when she too had read the news.

"I don't know," he told her. "Nobody does. We'll just

have to wait and see."

There were, of course, several weeks to be spent in waiting. Edmond had to go into hiding when a vengeful mob came to burn his desert home. Things became so bad that he dared't even phone his mother any more lest the call be traced by dangerous eavesdroppers. By the time the shards of the comet arrived in the vicinity of the Earth he was by no means sorry to see its countless offspring.

For one fabulous night the sky was filled with shooting stars, which lit up the sky as if it were day – but when morning came the dust of the multiple impacts blotted out the sun. The world was plunged into an awful darkness which brought winter to the tropics and withered every crop in every field.

With its foundations ripped out, the precariously balanced civilization of the 21st century crumbled into a terrible anarchy. The war of all against all demolished nation states as easily as it turned cities into festering sores of violence and disease.

The last phone call Edmond Lucifer made to his mother was very brief. "It's not your fault, Eddie," she said. "Your father meant well, and I should have married Bobby Murgatroyd anyway."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," he assured her, insincerely. It *would* have made a difference – not to the world, which would have suffered the same fate regardless, but to *him*.

"We're all going to die, aren't we, Eddie," his mother said, tearfully. It had been a long time since he had last heard her voice dissolve into sobs.

"Not all," he said. "A lot, but not all."

He was right. Within a matter of months the whole world had become a desert. Billions died in the course of the next few years, but the world of the 21st century had billions to spare.

In time, the dust settled again and the sky cleared, so that the sun might shine by day – and the stars by night.

Eddie Rowbotham, as he now called himself, never looked up at the stars again. He kept his eyes and his thoughts firmly fixed on the ground. He didn't feel any particular sense of loss; he just kept telling himself that it wasn't safe to go out after dark. He spent the rest of his life trying to make people like him by trying to fit in, but it never worked. He just didn't have the gift.

In the new mythologies adopted by the newly-forged tribes whose members scraped a living from the ruins of the old world the name of Lucifer was once again attached – by mistake – to a literal devil. Within a few generations, though, the fearful figure had been reduced to a mere phantom, invoked as a petty curse and deployed in macabre jokes.

By the time the remainder of the comet came back to complete the process of destruction, the fateful syllables of Edmond Lucifer's adopted name had become utterly meaningless.

Francis Amery is the pseudonym of a well known British science-fiction author who last appeared here with the short-story "Alfonso the Wise" (issue 105).

DARRELL SCHWEITZER has been an individual World Fantasy Award finalist twice, first with a novella, "To Become A Sorcerer," and then with *Transients*, a collection of his horror stories. The novella now forms the opening four chapters of his latest novel, *The Mask of the Sorcerer*, a splendidly phantasmagorical and well-wrought book, published by New English Library in 1995. *Interzone* readers will recognize the hero, Sekenre, from "On the Last Night of the Festival of the Dead" (IZ 90), "The Giant Vorviades" (IZ 99) and "King Father Stone" (IZ 103). A complete bibliography would include over 150 short stories published professionally, along with dozens of essays, poems, book and film reviews and interviews.

Born in 1952, Darrell has lived in the Philadelphia area all his life. In 1988, he became an editor (sole editor since 1991) of the revived *Weird Tales*, renamed *Worlds of Fantasy and Horror* in 1994. The magazine won a World Fantasy Award in 1992. Earlier, he worked as an editorial assistant at *Amazing Science Fiction* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, and perpetrated a fanzine, *Procrastination* (1969-1981).

Darrell has attended conventions since he was 16 years old. If the hotel lifts don't work, ask him to pick the lock of the stairwell door with his Swiss Army Knife. Find him in the crowd by looking for vintage hippie clothes, or the T-shirt he designed that advertises, "Final Mints: Breath Freshener for the Dead." He used to wear a button that said, "The Meaning of Life Available Here, 25¢." Now his button says, "May I Shamelessly Attempt to Sell You A Book?"

Do you write and edit full time now?
Well, I write, edit and sell things. And I do a small amount of teaching. I've always felt that in order to keep your writing pure, you must compromise something else. Seriously, a good many careers have been shipwrecked on the need to make a living. I think writers should not be inhibited as H. P. Lovecraft was about vulgar commerce. You could sell a paperback novel every year, or even two a year, and make less than \$10,000 a year. Therefore, you've got to have a racket. Perhaps you should become a guru and sell the meaning of life.

One of the other secrets of literary success is to avoid responsibility. I never quite had a full-time job. When I got out of graduate school, I worked in a department store for a little while. Then we tore it down. The store went out of business and we had the sublimely entropic experience of working in a store that was crumbling all around us like a set from a Terry Gilliam movie.

After that, I started working two or three days a week for George Scithers. It was a wonderful thing for a writer to do, because not only was it sort of related to my career, but it was part-time, with very flexible hours, a pattern I've maintained ever since. I could write around that, as opposed to having a fully-engaging day job which might leave me too exhausted to write very much.

Do you need to have habits? Do you write at a certain time of the day?
Not really. Well, sometimes getting up and writing when I'm fresh is a good idea. I find that fiction comes when it wants to. I've always wished I could sit down and turn it on like a spigot. I can revise a novel like that, but I cannot create a first draft so reliably. I have to be "with story."

I had actually planned *The Mask of the Sorcerer* as a fix-up of three novellas, with practical considerations in mind, like the fact that no one serializes novels any more. But I could never find a plot or a structure for the

The Sorcerer behind The Mask

Darrell Schweitzer
interviewed by
Lelia Loban



second novella and I eventually gave up and just wrote "Chapter 5" instead, and did it as a straight novel.

When I was writing *The Mask of the Sorcerer*, I didn't realize it was any longer than *The Shattered Goddess*. I wasn't counting and I was deceived by my 12-pitch typeface, which gives a deceptively large number of words on the page, without looking at all cramped. And therefore, I was quite astonished to discover that the novel was in fact about 180,000 words long.

My method has always been to write the first drafts of fiction on the typewriter. In order to get a second draft up to steam, I re-type the entire story. I tell it again. When the story is on paper in a rough form and has probably been hand-corrected, I go to the computer. I have not gotten to the point where I can outline anything, nor am I somebody who writes the scenes out of order and then patches them together. I suppose that makes me unintriguingly linear, but I write a story by *telling* it, not by assembling the pieces.

But I don't write non-fiction this way. The computer was invented to enable people to write non-inspiration-driven journalistic prose which has to be trimmed to a specific size. Non-fiction is more likely to have an external source, such as a book to review. I can turn non-fiction on like a spigot.

Then again, I write poetry by hand, triple-spaced in a notebook to leave room for revisions. The text will then go to the computer and be revised even more. I want to move very freely over the page and to see how previous versions looked. A holographic approach. For that purpose, I'm using a pre-electronic word processor with zero-K RAM and a bio-electrical processing unit.

Do you like writing?

Yes. David Schow said in an interview I did with him that if you don't like the act of writing, not only are you in deep trouble, but you're not really going to make it. I think the agonies that some writers talk about are the agonies of wanting to write and being unable to. Literary constipation.

I've had periods of time in which I couldn't write what I was supposed to be writing. I think I'm in one right now, in that I'm supposed to be starting a new novel and at present I haven't. This is usually the subconscious telling you that it's not ready. I can normally write something else during these periods. Sometimes you go through all manner of evasion. That's one reason why it's very nice to move between non-fiction and fiction.

My usual pace has been to write about a story a month. Roughly ten stories a year. It gets to be a lot after

20 years, but when you think about it, that's actually not a huge wordage.

Do you believe in the kinds of supernatural phenomena that you write about?

No. I've written whole essays on the subject, including a two-part essay, "The Necessity of Skepticism," in the first two issues of the revived *Science Fiction Review*. If you actually believe this stuff, you have no control over it.

A good deal of writing fiction is being able to imagine where you are not. And a good deal of writing fiction in, say, non-contemporary settings is to be able to imagine people living in a world which is unlike yours but ordinary to them. All of the standard assumptions, the things that everybody knows, are different for them.

One can learn this technique extremely well from Gene Wolfe. As Gene pointed out, for an ancient Greek, it would not be extraordinary if every once in a while, somebody saw a god. All the fantasy writer has to do is, not necessarily borrow the specific details of, say, classical Greece, but borrow the attitude or outlook which takes divine apparitions for granted. Ask, "What questions do we ask about the way the world works?" Then change all the answers.

Do you ever base your stories on dreams?

No. My dreams are usually much more mundane imagery and not all that exciting. Basically, I can do it better myself, so I do, deliberately and consciously. No, I've never had wildly fantastic dreams.

What writers influenced you?

Morbius Mortimer Moamrath is my poetic mentor. Morbius Moamrath was a pseudo-Lovecraftian character created by Joe Pumilia and Bill Wallace and various other crazy people from Texas. Morbius Moamrath is the fictitious author of "The Young Guy from Fuggoth and Other Limericks." The great pulpy horror of American literature, who wrote for *Weird Trails*, *the Magazine of Supernatural Cowboy Stories*, and *Aryan Atrocity Adventures*. He is noted for his romance novel, *Pickman's Motel*, and his detective novel, *The Maltese Trapezohedron*, and *Riders of the Purple Ooze*, his eldritch Western. I learned to write limericks from the example of Morbius Moamrath, although I feel unequal to even slavishly imitating his prose.

Lord Dunsany is a fairly obvious influence. I suppose H. P. Lovecraft influenced what you might call my aesthetic outlook, but despite what everybody thinks, I never attempted to imitate his style or technique. It was simply not suitable for what I

was doing when I started writing. Dunsany's technique was. Curiously enough, Tolkien never seriously influenced me, probably because I was thinking small: short stories rather than epic trilogies. Sometimes I'll even base a story on the feeling that some other writer hasn't handled his material right. That sounds terribly arrogant, but sometimes you can find an overlooked gem on the floor of the other guy's workshop.

What were your earliest stories like?

Funny you should ask: The first story I ever wrote was based on a dream. It was a completely incoherent mess. The second was a science-fictional "neat idea" story. It was a typical sort of story that 14-year-olds write. When I became an editor, I became able to recognize that precise kind of slush pile story that builds up to a supposedly clever idea and *stops*.

I had read, in the blurbs of Fredrik Pohl's *Worlds of If* at the time, that he had been buying first stories. There was one new writer in every issue. Pohl mentioned that one of his new writers was a high-school student. And I thought, "Gee, I'm a high-school student. I can do this, too! In fact, I can probably do better than So-and-so." I remember I wrote a snotty cover letter: "So-and-so I guess is no more than 14 years old." Of course, I was 14 years old.

I even received a letter back from the author I referred to. He was not 14 years old. He didn't say, "Well, kid, if you ever reach puberty some day, you'll understand." He was gracious, I think, because he was a kind-hearted and forgiving soul who could see that if I wasn't drowned immediately, like a superfluous kitten, maybe I would amount to something someday.

Pohl did not buy the story, of course. It in fact came back in *three days*. Not only was this editor extremely efficient, but the postal service was faster in those days. And the manuscript had been read. Pohl had checked things off on the rejection slip, obvious stuff but very accurate.

I was absolutely certain I was going to make a hundred bucks from this story. Right! Of course, at the rates sf magazines paid and at the length of this story, I would have made nothing of the sort. And I of course made nothing and killed several stamps. But I did publish the same story in a fanzine later.

I then actually developed a certain amount of wisdom, mere adolescent wisdom, you understand. At about this time — about 1968 — there was no small press as we now know it. We had very few non-professional magazines that paid for fiction and had standards. *Weirdbook* was probably the first one of the current cycle. It had just started. *Anubis*, a good mag-

azine, paid in copies. And Joseph Payne Brennan published *Macabre*, mostly devoted to poetry. That left grungy, mimeographed fanzines as the main alternative “market.” I recognized that, well, if I frequently got stories rejected from the fanzines, maybe I should wait until that stopped happening before going back to the prozines. And therefore I did not submit anything to professional magazines for several years.

The beginning of my career is only a series of transitions from fanzines to something a little better, like the early *Space and Time*, then on to *Weirdbook*, to *Whispers* and *Fantasy Tales*. The early ‘70s was a rather grim period to be trying to write short fantasy. The market for fantasy had to develop out of Robert E. Howard fandom, with magazines like *Fantasy Crossroads*. Jessica Salmonson was editing *Fantasy and Terror*. Charles de Lint and various Canadians put out *Beyond the Fields We Know*. Enough people wanted a fantasy field that they were trying to create it from the ground up.

The distinction between professional and amateur has totally blurred now. Magazines like, say, *Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Fantasy Magazine*, or *Scream Factory*, or *Cemetery Dance*, or *Aboriginal SF* are all distributed in bookstores but not on newsstands. These magazines pay for material and have professional standards, but are sub-professional in circulation. In this sense, we live in the golden age of the small magazine. The desktop publishing revolution has made it much easier to produce a professional quality “small-press” magazine cheaply. *Weird Tales* and *Worlds of Fantasy and Horror* fall into this category. It’s a mixed blessing for writers. There are more markets than ever before, but there’s less exposure in them.

Does editing Worlds of Fantasy and Horror help your writing?

Well, the first thing one learns from editing is what not to do. I think that all would-be writers should do a stint reading slush pile. It’s very educational.

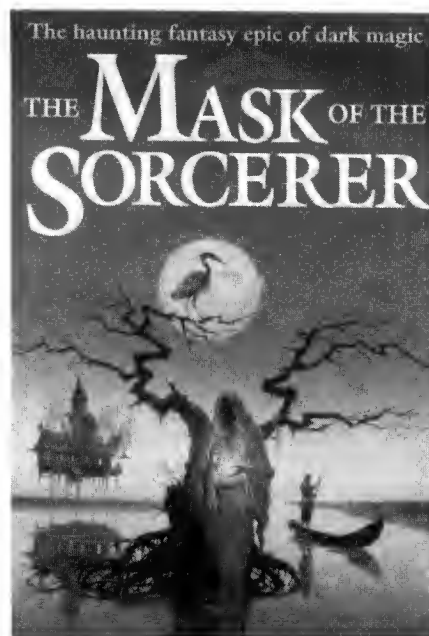
If you publish a magazine because you want to get rich, you’re crazy. You should go break open parking metres or do something else more gainful. You publish a magazine because you wish to have an impact on the field. You have an agenda, a sense of mission.

There still are not a huge number of markets for the imaginary-scene horror fantasy story, the kind of story published in *Weird Tales*. It sounds odd to say this, since my novella, “To Become a Sorcerer,” was a World Fantasy Award finalist, but had it not been published in my own magazine,

it probably could not have been published at all. Or possibly it would have run in *Weirdbook*, which has a circulation of about a thousand. Otherwise, there are no markets for long stories of this type. I should hastily explain at this point that when something of mine gets published in a magazine I edit, my colleagues bought it. I don’t get to vote when I’m the author of the story in question. I do get rejected from my own magazine.

I can’t help but notice that when we started, we got a great deal of imaginary-world fantasy in the slush pile. Now we get very little. Several times a day, we get stories entitled, “Road Kill.” We get an awful lot of pointless horror. Stories about nasty, dull people doing nasty, dull things until they all die.

I like editing. Ideally I would like for an eccentric millionaire to back *Worlds of Fantasy and Horror*, enable us to get it up to, say, bi-monthly,



make it profitable, and allow everybody to get fat salaries. If not the magazine, I think I would like to edit anthologies.

When you started out as a professional, was it an advantage or a disadvantage to be known on the convention circuit as a fan and a fan writer?

I’ve always wondered about that. It can help or it can hurt. You can make a complete fool of yourself and then no one wants to deal with you. You can become well-known and respected and then, yes, they do want to deal with you. You can be taken for granted for having been around forever, too.

Since my transition to something that might be called professionalism was extremely gradual, through the

emerging small press, it helped that I was in fandom. Had I been living all alone in a post box in Idaho, not only would it have been cramped in there, but I would probably not have discovered any of the places where I could actually be published.

What got you started writing this kind of fiction? Were people in your family reading it?

They were not reading it. They didn’t understand it, and, as usual, they thought it was junk. I went to a Catholic prep school, Devon Preparatory School — a very conservative place, for all we called it Devon Zoological Gardens — where everybody thought science fiction was junk. I had a very old-fashioned experience, almost what I would expect people of a generation earlier to have gone through. Yet the same teacher who said that none of this was “real literature” allowed me to publish a story about malevolent Lovecraftian leprechauns in the school newspaper. I think he was sufficiently impressed that any student could write *anything* that he allowed me to get away with it. Or he thought that I would eventually outgrow this foolishness. And look how I turned out!

However, my parents may not have understood what I was writing or why, but they supported it. The ultimate support came when my father put up the money to send me to Clarion when I was 20. I think he was afraid I might otherwise spend my life on welfare. This was before Reaganomics, so he couldn’t have envisioned me as a street person.

Did Clarion help you?

It probably made me more stubborn. The groundswell of fantasy writing which swept the field a few years later was just starting, and indeed, certain fellow students at Clarion were absolutely intolerant of what I was writing. They tried to get me to write like them. They wanted me to write very relevant, near-future, serious, politically-toned science fiction. And my talents do not actually lie in this area.

To their credit, the professional writers who taught there, with one exception, did not have this attitude, or at least were less dramatic about it, for all I don’t think most of them really approved of me either. During the first week of Clarion, one of the instructors said, “Well, T. H. White has written, therefore medieval fantasy is finished. There’s no need to write any more.” That struck me at the time as one of the stupidest things I had ever heard, and it’s still on my list.

I began the earliest *We Are All Legends* episode at Clarion. I have, in essence, made an entire career out of

doing what I was told *not* to do at Clarion. That's probably one reason why I've never been published in any of the Clarion anthologies. I'm not the sort of writer the "Clarion school of science fiction" wishes to encourage. But, to be fair, I must also mention that Harlan Ellison, in particular, was very forceful in defending my right to write whatever I felt like.

On the positive side, Clarion makes you far more deliberate about writing. It makes you think of a story as a thing of parts which can be worked on and shaped and changed and is not necessarily this sacred effusion that has come out in absolutely perfect form. At the very least, Clarion made me a much better critic. As soon as I came back from Clarion, my book reviewing got better, because I was far more analytical. And Clarion also teaches you a professional attitude, the idea that you must take your writing seriously.

Do you still find workshops valuable?
A good deal of what you hear at workshops is not of any value. But if suddenly you get a really interesting response, any skewed, consistent reaction, you should listen. All of the women object to a point of plausibility in this story and the men don't. All of the older people find this story set in 1940 implausible. People who have worked in laboratories don't believe your scientist characters. Pay attention when that happens.

I never workshop anything but finished work. It's dangerous to do so while the actual creative process is going on. You may freeze up. You may become too deliberate. You don't want people messing around inside your head, particularly people who are not necessarily qualified to perform such surgery, until the story is finished. You don't want to collaborate with your workshop.

Sometimes I will find myself arguing with somebody about points of logic. You follow a certain emotional trajectory in a story, and you feel a certain release and conclusion at some point, and that is the *right* ending. If other people insist that it's illogical, I don't change the ending to the way *they* want; I go back and reinforce the logic to support the ending *I* want. It may be that some sort of informational cue is missing.

Also, the workshop will sometimes find embarrassing typos and places where you left words out. The only way you can truly master a story so that there are no undetected errors or infelicities of style in it is to give one, preferably several, readings of it. Otherwise, something awful will inevitably slip by, like a "centipede with twelve arms." And then you get gutted in David Langford's *Ansible* column. Such things are embarrass-

ing because you *know better*. You just didn't see them. Often the problem is not so much bad writing but a failure of proofreading.

You mentioned collaborating. Do you do much of it?

There are three kinds of collaborations, and I have done all of them. In the first, one writer is the master and the other is the student. There were two instances in the George Scithers *Asimov's* where somebody submitted short little pun stories, and couldn't phrase or form them correctly. These were farmed out to me for fixing. This is not what I would call a deeply creative act.

Then there is the sort of collaboration where both writers come at this as fully competent professionals. One example of my collaboration with an equal is "The Children of Lommos," with John Betancourt. He was already a steadily-selling writer at the time and he could have written his own version. It would have been very different, though.

The kind of collaboration I do with Jason Van Hollander is more peculiar. Now, Jason has many talents I don't. He is a very splendid artist and he has written a couple of quite fine stories by himself, which he has sold all by himself, and I recommend them. But he tends to write these fascinating Rorschach blots, fragments of stories I could never create. Between the two of us, I clearly have a better sense of form. So I'm the technician. I will frequently take one of these unsatisfactory but really interesting fragments of his and whip it up into a story, and then we will haggle over it. And the result is a story like "The Unmaker of Men." [*Weird Tales* #298, Fall 1990.] I don't believe that you're going to find a humorous torture scene of people being drawn through printer rollers in any of my solo fiction.

If an editor wants you to revise, do you do it?

It depends. If the editor is an absolute fool, you shouldn't be dealing with him. If he is not, certainly I will listen. Alan Rodgers, when he edited *Night Cry*, was a very good, hands-on editor. He improved every story that I sold to him. One of the ways you can tell if I approve of what the editor had me do is if I retain the editor's version when the story is reprinted in a collection.

It seems unusual that a writer who got published as young as you did waited this late to write a long novel.
I never quite made prodigy class. I did publish a novel rather early, sort of, with *The White Isle*, which was originally going to be published by Borgo Press in the late '70s. Then it ended up being serialized in *Elinor*

Mavor's *Fantastic* in 1980. But so many people in our field sell novels in their 20s — or even teens — that mine is not an extraordinary accomplishment.

I developed slowly as a novelist relative to my short-story writing. What conventionally should have happened with a writer in my situation was, around 1980, some editor with the power to make it stick would have taken an interest in me and encouraged me to write novels. And I would have developed a steady market for novels at least ten years earlier than I did. This is not to suggest that a short-story writer is a stunted novelist, but the novelistic branch of my career has not grown very rapidly because no one has watered it.

What are you working on now?

Well, I'm trying to start a new novel, my contractual obligation novel, for New English Library, but I wish it to be far more than that. There will be more Sekenre stories. There's going to be a book of my essays on fantastic literature. It includes everything from critical studies to the infamous article, "Creating Frivolous Literary Theories."

S. T. Joshi and I are editing, for White Wolf Publishing, a book of the uncollected Lord Dunsany, some of which you've been seeing in *Weird Tales* and *Worlds of Fantasy and Horror*. There are about 400 uncollected Dunsany items. About 160 are stories, most of them quite short. The two of us may even be going to Ireland this summer, to Dunsany Castle, to look at all of the manuscripts.

But the primary thing on the horizon has got to be the new novel, which I think is going to be an Atlantis novel, although hopefully not like any Atlantis novel you've ever seen before, and bearing virtually no relationship to the Atlantis novel that I once wrote, allegedly "in collaboration," with a certain artist who failed to sell it.

I've never written a funny novel. I've never written a historical fantasy novel, set in real history. I tried to set one in Italy, in the early fifth century A.D. I had about a 20-page tableau to open it up, but no hook to make the plot get into the next chapter. You probably haven't heard the last of that material, all about witchcraft and the fall of Rome, but right now it is my one aborted novel.

Of course, what everybody wants to do in the future is not write the same thing over and over again.

Thank you, Darrell.

Do you want to know the meaning of life?

Sure.

Oh, but you'd have to give me a quarter.

The Crystal-Man



First it is the patterns. In the white, shining heart of the glassmaker's furnace I perceive the beginnings of some exquisite design, patterns, the subtle flame-motifs favoured by my master Vaxos; those very zig-zag crests which Vaxos engraves on piss-pots, on vases, and most especially on the fantastically intricate funerary vessels so popular among the great merchant-princes of Zhamiir, whereby the ashes of the deceased trickle endlessly through tiny veins of glass, giving the overall figure a semblance of motion, even of life.

There: in the country of fire. I stare into the flames by the hour until my eyeballs are dazzled, seared, fascinated by whatever glimpse I might gain of that bright, unreachable country beyond the burning gates, where no flesh-man can ever pass. There: the rhythmical leaping flames laden with mystery; the parching brilliance leaves my face a cracked landscape, irrigated only by the sparse rivulets of my tears.

There. So beautiful.

Only with the greatest reluctance can I ever draw myself away, close my eyes, rest them for a minute, then regard the duller, imperfect world of the work-

shop itself. The dark world, the shadows, where the gods are not.

I turn aside. I put down my stoking rod. Elsewhere in the house, Vaxos my master, that colossus who towered over my life almost like one of those forbidden gods I have always sought, lies coughing out his lungs. I hear the barefoot patter of the servant girl, racing to empty a chamberpot before Vaxos coughs again.

They say that the blood of Vaxos boils in his veins. I, who have lived with him for all my life that I can remember, believe it does. Perhaps it hisses in the girl's pot. Perhaps, too, his untreatable disease might be the result of endless experimentations, the new powders and ores whose toxic exudations Vaxos steadfastly ignored.

Or it might have been his temper, his legendary thunderings, whereby at the slightest hint of imperfection, the labour of weeks would be hurled into the street, the unworthy journeyman hurled likewise. Stranger things are rumoured, though I have never witnessed them: recalcitrant objects of glass and crystal flogged by the Master of Glass in a frenzy of perfectionism; barrels of potash and lime taken into his

By Darrell Schweitzer & Jason van Hollander



Illustrations by Russell Morgan

own bed so that an unwholesome “chemical coition” might occur.

Indeed. Back to work. While the furnace heats, the floor needs sweeping of the ash and glittering bits. The pontil rods must be filed clean. So much preparation. Tonight, despite the proximity of my master’s death, he is to create his greatest work. All must be in readiness.

Shards crunch under my feet.

That I had survived at all, and so long, in the service of this glass-frenzied madman was a matter of some wonder to all concerned. It couldn’t have been pity. Vaxos was too lacking in human qualities for that.

No, I think it was *utility*. Somehow a wretched, ragged boy showed up on the doorstep of the glass works, who might have been an imbecile or a changeling for his inability to remember any past life at all, this bag of bones, barefoot, burnt from sand and hot paving stones, close to death as he lay parched in the summer’s heat, this amnesiac waif blown like a swirl of dust out of the trackless desert, was, in the eye of

Vaxos, *useful*. Imagine a tailor walking along the street. He looks down. He sees a chipped piece of wood. To him it is not a scrap, but a button. All it needs is some polishing, some carving, a hole drilled in the centre for the thread. He thinks, *Ah! I can use that someday!* and puts it in his pocket, to be saved and filed away, even though the suit he is presently working on doesn’t require buttons of that sort.

So it was that the dreadful Vaxos picked me up in his arms. With his own hands he fed me chilled broth, on that summer evening so long ago, at the true beginning of my life – for all I may have been ten or eleven at the time – and with those same hands he bandaged my blistered feet, that I might be able to walk among the shards and nubbins and sweep the workshop that very night.

So I did.

The following morning, he sent for a cobbler, who made me a pair of heavy boots, and for a tailor, who made me plain clothes of the cheapest, though serviceable materials. Only much later did he remember to give me a name, *Ilvador*, which merely means “what I found.”

Why?

My gaze strays back to the furnace door, into the wonderful country of fire beyond.

Passion. Everything that walked or crept is governed by one passion or another.

I close the door, shivering in the sudden absence of heat and light. I resume, and complete my sweeping; then I lay out on the table all those special instruments my master will need, like an acolyte preparing the holy of holies for the coming of a priest.

Dangerous thoughts in blaspheming Zhamiir, where the gods have been cast down in the name of Commerce and sold. But, yes, the passion of Vaxos is something akin to worship and I too care for nothing else in the world but for the beautiful workings in glass and the fires that birth them.

Once, when I was 15 years old, as Vaxos lay snoring after a particularly strenuous orgy of glass-making – a commission from the emperor involving life-sized glass horses in fantastic colours – I slipped out into the city streets, looking like some automaton in my heavy boots and leather apron, with my hair a formless explosion from countless singeing.

There was so much noise, I thought it must be a carnival. I hadn't been outside of the workshop in years. I had only the vaguest idea of what the rest of the world was like.

It was a carnival of a sort. All around me people cavorted in fantastic costumes, trailing long, colourful streamers. Drunkards swilled and puked on doorsteps, laughed and swilled some more. A woman danced naked, splattered with mud every time she slipped and fell, to the great merriment of onlookers.

But the celebrations had a more fantastic, serious side, as I found out when I reached the great forum of Zhamiir. There the huge sandstone idols of the gods were being torn down and smashed into gravel while crowds cheered, and the more precious silver and gold images were put up for auction. The tapestries and carpets from the temples, the famous cloth-gods, they too fell prey to the depredations of the money-men. On that day you could acquire a fertility deity for a mere half-dozen *royals*. No one was even interested in profit. The revolution had occurred. The merchants had overthrown the gods. The low prices were intentional, to show that the gods were contemptible and impotent.

Woe to any sincere devotee who thought otherwise. Woe.

As I drew nearer, I saw that the auctions were conducted under compulsion by the priests themselves, many of them naked, their bodies covered with welts and burns, the flesh of their faces and hands flayed off and replaced with ridiculous waxen masks and gloves. Here a weeping dog with the webbed paws of a toad. There a fish whose arm-stumps ended in carrots and celery.

A procession of such wretched creatures passed right in front of me, chains clanking, dung and stones and insults raining down on them. I stood in silent amazement unable to work up any ill feeling toward these holy men at all. Instead, I began to weep. They were martyrs, suffering for those very gods who had with-

drawn from unworthy Zhamiir for inscrutable reasons of their own.

I struggled with the seeming paradox that gods who *were* gods could be driven out by men. I came to no conclusion save that they must have left of their own accord, and would return one day, if mankind adequately repented.

Somehow one of the priests must have been able to read my thoughts. He broke away from the procession and knelt at my feet, staring up at me through a mask like the behind of a jackass. Wax fingers fashioned and painted like congealed masses of cheap coins feebly hooked onto my wrists.

"You are a *miracle*, child," he sputtered. "Yes, you. I think some god reached down and touched you, blasting your mortal life from you, opening you up to new and divine possibilities which only the years will fully articulate. Alas that this miracle has occurred too late! Alas!"

Then someone yanked him away. I saw that his mask had fallen down below his chin and that his face still seemed to be, quite impossibly, burning. Tiny blue and white flames danced over the ruin of his features.

I screamed, but my cry was lost in the laughter of the crowd which closed over me like a sea.

Later, in the silent evening, I came to the cemetery, where the corpses of deceased notables had been dug up and placed in an obscene tableau, murdered priests dressed as rats chewing on the dugs of the late empress who was made up as some kind of serpent-harlequin; near skeletons dancing and gaming and coupling in a parody of life that I, amnesiac Ilvador, whose slate of a mind had been wiped clean by the gods, failed to understand for lack of referents.

I didn't get the joke, but I laughed anyway. I still do not know why. All around me, corpses creaked in the wind. They dangled, impaled on stakes or crucified on the branches of trees. The cemetery remained quiet at this hour. The fun and festivities had drifted to the city's centre, in the forum and the despoiled palace, where the emperor was already well beyond ever being able to pay my master Vaxos for the glass horses.

I laughed and danced and joked with the dead well into the night, the infectious spirit of the times having come over me. But then I truly repented, and wept, and begged each and every cadaver its forgiveness, and rearranged them so that all of us were kneeling, facing the sunrise as we worshipped the coming sun and the distant gods.

Thus Vaxos found me. Thence he dragged me by the hair through the sodden, besotted, smoky streets, back to his workshop where he administered a beating of such legendary proportions that the awe-stricken assistants who witnessed the event – for he still had a large staff in those days – spoke of it in almost reverential tones for the years to come. Those who survived, that is. Rumour also has it that Vaxos killed many of his apprentices, or even fed them alive into his furnaces, so that their agonies might contribute unique hues to the glass.

Maybe so. I came to understand then that even as I am the instrument of Vaxos, to be pounded into useful shape, so he, unknowing, is an instrument of the gods,

shaped by them to some inscrutable end.

When I stopped screaming, I was allowed to lie down in an ocean of my own blood and dream fantastic dreams.

Vaxos is dying. Cough. Cough. Splat.

I can but struggle to understand. I dip a rag into a bucket of water and hold the rag to my nose, trying to breathe through the sopping cloth. Yes, it must be like that for him.

Trembling as I do so, I put on my master's apron, which is still too large for me, and his own porcelain mask, which he wears to protect his face against the searing blast. The visage is that of a puff-cheeked angel, now sooty, the gold paint of the angel's hair long since burned away.

Thus I become Vaxos. Thus I open the furnace door and peer through his eyes, beholding or imagining some mystical, impossible supernally beautiful face begin to form amidst the flames; and I strain to hear it speak words I cannot even begin to understand –

Thus Vaxos finds me.

"Boy!" He grabs me by the shoulder and whirls me around. He rips the mask from my face and slams the furnace door shut. It is useless to protest that I am not a boy, that I have spent a full 20 years in his employ, obsessed as he, hungering day and night to be taken into his confidence, to know his secrets. "What can you mean by this impudence, except to mock me?"

"It's... not what you think!"

"Oh, it isn't?" Now he wears the mask, wheezing through the round mouth-opening, all the more terrible for the absurdity of the image. Blood splashes over the lower porcelain lip. "What am I thinking? Can you tell me that?"

I cannot. He sags onto a bench and coughs into a clenched fist, under the mask.

"I meant no disrespect, Sir. I did it in order to understand your suffering." I hold up the rag. "Why else would I nearly suffocate myself? Surely not for amusement?"

"You are a strange boy," the Master of Glass allows after a few minutes, and in this musing admission I think I detect tones of defeat, a kind of knell. Truly, the old man is dying.

"You know, Sir," I say, surprising myself with my own boldness, "that I could easily overpower you, take from your strongbox all the silver *royals* I could carry and –"

Vaxos waves a hand for me to be silent. "Cease this prattle. You're not interested in money."

I gaze intently into the darkness which hides his eyes behind the mask. "No, Sir, I am not. It is crystal and glass that I live for. I worship the flames, as do you. We are alike, you and I. That is why you kept me by your side, is it not? Vaxos and Ilvador, are two of the same kind."

"Perhaps... More strange words from a strange boy. I think this is why I spared you and you alone from my anger. Surely it can't be for the deftness of your craft or the sensitivity of your soul." He tries to laugh, coughing up bloody phlegm, which drips from his chin. Yet behind this brief, wrenching spasm I think I can discern a genuine smile, maybe even real affection.



"Consider what I have said. Consider, too, that you have no issue, no heirs, no apprentices any more but for myself to preserve your knowledge and carry it on. Teach me. Instruct me."

And this is where destiny touches us, truly. This is where the gods work their belated miracle, through Vaxos, for all I do not think he even knows the names of the gods, or ever had, even in the days of the *god-madness* before the revolution.

But great things begin to happen. The old man's eyes glisten. His manner becomes animated, almost youthful. "I am on the threshold of wonderful discoveries. There are combustibles of unimaginable ferocity that I have only recently devised. New ways to work the glass, new techniques and methodologies that will usher in an age of beauty... beauty which borders on the sublime. A gorgeous and mystical epoch in which the arts of mankind will finally merge with the sublime."

I am amazed. He sounds like a *theomaniac* after all.

"Imagine if you can," he continues, "poems of glass. Prayers encapsulated in crystalline jars."

"I can imagine fanciful moods captured in graceful forms. I've seen that, worked by your own hands. But prayers?"

"Hear me out, Ilvador. Only two days ago, when I was heavily dosed with *hanquil*, did these revelations occur to me. In my feverish state, I scribbled my inspirations down. As soon as my head cleared, I discovered, among the illegible scrawls, much which had genuine validity." He reaches up to seize my shoulders, to shake me as if I were still that ten-year-old boy he found in the summer's dust. "The results are astonishing! As soon as the furnace is fully heated, I shall arrange a little demonstration. Little? No, very big indeed, the capstone of my career. But now, I must rest, for my lungs tax me beyond endurance."

He emits a syrupy wheeze and leans back unsteadily against the wall.

"What can I do?" I ask.

He motions for a quill, inkhorn, and parchment. He throws the horn aside angrily, for the blast of the furnace has dried the ink. Instead he dips the pen through the mask, into his own mouth, and writes in blood.

Most worthy successor, I pray that I live long enough to impart my knowledge and my quality. In this transference lay my profoundest hopes.

At age 15, as I lay in the congealing puddle of my own gore, I dreamt this dream for the first time:

Vaxos stands over me, blood-mouthed and smiling. It is night. He raises me gently by the hand and leads me along a beach. The night ocean crashes against the rocks. In the waning moonlight, thieving gulls pluck the eyeless flesh from luminous oysters. The old man, wizened grotesquely, capers like a bundle of sticks hurled in the wind, his clothing all afire, but not consuming him. Sparks trail like meteors, forming delicate script which floats in the air, fading before I can quite read it.

Waves burst against stones. Salt spray, like tears, momentarily blinds me. When vision returns, there stands Vaxos, walking on the surface water like a ghost, marvellously transformed, glowing from within, his

body no longer of flesh but of purest, living crystal; a shining man, a being of startling translucence, a veritable lantern, every vein, every artery molten and visible.

Bloodfire. Bloodlight. The innermost, inexhaustible energies of my master Vaxos.

The whole ocean has turned bright red beneath a scarlet moon.

A dark vessel floats near the shore, its rigging faintly outlined in orange flame.

"Into the boat, my boy," Vaxos commands. "Come." *Naked, I step into the vessel, and discover that it is composed entirely of smooth glass.*

On that first night, and on many others, I awakened in the dark, suffocating, drowning in that dream-sea of blood, gasping out the name of Vaxos the Crystal-Man.

Bloodlight. I jerk awake, startled that I have been asleep. There has been an unaccountable transition, as if moments or hours have been snipped from the flailing ribbon of my life.

The workshop is suffused with a lurid red glow. There is Vaxos, towering like a god once more, casting handful after handful of coloured pigments into the furnace, muttering magical imprecations behind his mask, oblivious to my presence. Once he pauses to stir the molten mixture within, using a long iron rod.

I stand at his side, fearful of his wrath, but he greets me almost merrily.

"Ah, *protégé*, the hour of your instruction has arrived. Great things await."

He nods toward the furnace. I peer into the beautiful flames, into the country of the gods beyond them. Beyond some impossibly distant horizon, titan faces rise up like suns.

At this moment I am supremely happy. Now, at last, my master is about to reveal all his secrets. I am fulfilled at last.

There is a loud knock at the door.

I turn around, furious. But Vaxos is nonplussed.

"Answer that, will you?"

"Who, by all the gods, would dare —?"

"Gods, my boy?"

I hurry to the door, open it, and in comes a shabby, mournful and tired-looking man of past middle years, whistling some routine, irrelevant tune as if he were delivering bread.

But his delivery is a bit more unusual. The stranger holds up front end of a long, rectangular wooden box. The rear is hefted by a *creature* of some sort, living, yes, but perhaps not at all natural, some botched homunculus scavenged from an alchemist's trash heap: skeletal and malformed, naked but for a soiled rag about its loins; skin pustulant, oily, and gray; its hairless head almost pointed, like a turnip. One reddish eye blinks ceaselessly. The other swims in white fluid.

The stranger and his monstrous assistant set the box down carefully on the workshop floor. The creature squats beside it and shits.

Still Master Vaxos merely turns to me and calmly says, "This is Jaexuma, a vendor."

I presume he means the man, not the other, though

in my frenzied impatience they seem the same. "And what does he sell at this hour?"

The vendor flashes an ethereal smile, and with great deliberation opens the box, which I realize, even before he does, to be a coffin.

"At this hour," mocks Jaexuma, "I sell clay."

Already Vaxos is counting out silver half-royals into the grave-robber's hand.

"Master, what good can come from this foul commerce?"

"Patience, boy. I do it for art. For beauty. Even as a flower grows from a dungheap —"

Jaexuma pokes me playfully. "Never mind why. It's a living." The gray homunculus whistles in assent. Once more Vaxos is overtaken by a coughing spasm. Money clinks to the floor. Quickly the peddler scoops it up, but Vaxos recovers, and the man can only hold out his hand while the Master counts out the silver pieces and takes back two, which are in excess of the agreed upon amount.

Then Jaexuma does not immediately leave. "I want to watch," he says. This is the final outrage. Once more finding my own reckless courage, heedless of Vaxos or even the homunculus, I haul Jaexuma by the collar to the door and heave him into the street, then stand aside as the monster shuffles after him.

I slam and bar the door, leaning against it in sudden exhaustion, and can only watch as Vaxos dribbles more coloured powder over the dead man within the coffin. Then he ladles molten glass over the corpse. Steam hisses and rises, and Vaxos says aloud, as if reciting something, "Alive or dead we are all the same, and in the end all of us are only the cracked and flawed crockery of nature —"

"— and of the Gods."

"Leave piety aside and study the worm if you would know perfection. In decay and dust are we all made perfect and equal," says Vaxos, aglow with the firelight, almost — though I am sure my eyes deceive me — luminous from within, like a lantern of flesh.

I cannot understand my master's words. They are mysteries. This is a holy time. I cannot understand, but obey and follow and am instructed, as we shape glass over the dead man, until he is encased, a parody of his living self, this fat, wrinkled old prince of the bazaar set in the posture of an exquisite dancer. As the light washes over him and seems to fill him, he, too is momentarily self-illuminated. But he is a mere shell. There is nothing inside. The light goes out and the glass cracks.

"It is as I had feared," sighs Vaxos. With a shovel, he smashes the glass corpse to bits and hands me the shovel. I heave the remains into the fiery furnace. The mess the gray creature left on the floor gleams with rainbow colours. My Master is alive with fire now.

I watch with fascination as he unstoppers a tiny flask and measures out grains of white powder into his hand.

"This is the dreaded, powerful, and decidedly illegal drug, *hanquil*," he explains, "which was all the fashion among the decadent aristocracy of former times." He counts out the grains again, for my benefit, picking them up one by one on the tip of his finger before touching them to his tongue beneath his mask. "One grain



doesn't do much of anything. Two produce a slight giddiness. Three suffice to cure neuralgic aches. Four temporarily numb all pain and produce a sense of deep seriousness, which is immediately dispelled by the *fifth* grain, which transforms all existence into one vast and inexplicable *joke*. Thus did the degenerate nobles laugh and gasp and laugh some more, sometimes perishing of starvation while they waited for the punch-line! Ha! Ha! The sixth leads to a swift, giddy, cackling death!"

"Master! Wait!" At this point I cannot help but notice that Vaxos has *already taken six grains*.

"Ah, but in the *seventh* grain," he continues, "in that one, yes, the seventh, the eighth, the *ninth*, are all things transformed utterly, all ideals met, perfection achieved, what we used to call the divine apprehended – you can call it what you like, boy; to me it is the summit, the summation of my art, the pinnacle of man's rational mastery over unruly nature! It is pure beauty!"

By this point he has ingested ten grains. He trembles, like a nervous dancer about to begin. His whole body streams with sweat. The facial features of the *porcelain mask* begin to shift, producing a wild grimace, which yields to laughter, then horror, then an expression which, truly the eye has never seen before.

I know it then. The gods are returning, through Master Vaxos, for all he perhaps does not realize as much.

He turns to me, one last time, and says, very sincerely, "It is all so *funny*, my boy, so absurd, and therefore beautiful. The joke is that there is *nothing there*, nothing beyond the proverbial veil, in the empty country of the gods, any where. Nothing! Only the furnace is pure, in its utter destruction of all imperfect things!"

Then I watch in helpless horror, weeping like the bewildered child I once was when first he found me and named me, I who am merely That Which Vaxos Found – I watch as the great wizard of glass, Vaxos, rolls and stirs the molten mass within the furnace, as he draws a great mass onto the end of his blowing-rod, and shapes a perfect crystalline skull, as fine a thing as any he has ever produced.

I am left with the irrelevant worry that no one will buy it, since such luxury goods are now out of fashion, bearing as they do the stigma of old-fashioned rank and privilege.

Yet he labours with renewed vigour, with awesome artistry, a magical thing himself, already beyond mere living or mere death under the influence of *hanquil*. But if this demonstration is to be my education, it has failed. I do not comprehend. I beg him to slow down, to explain. He has given me only a puzzle, not an answer, not clarity.

Can he intend that I spend the rest of my days figuring it out? Is he like the father who makes his son heir to a vast treasure chest, then commands him to find the key?

Yes.

At the very end, he does what no competent or even sane glass-blower would ever do.

He inhales through the blowing-tube, and at once the fury of the furnace explodes within his ruined lungs, transfiguring him with fire, with coloured salts, with the ashes of the smashed corpse, with the *very light of the gods*.

A human beacon. Brilliant. Consumed. His mask falls off. His face is burning, outlined in tiny blue and white flames, yet his expression is totally calm. He is at peace. He has achieved his goal, even if beyond my reach, beyond my unworthy sight. His body crumples up like charred paper and is slowly reduced to a smouldering mass of ruin right next to the watery smear of homunculus dung.

I try to convince myself that he looked on me fondly at the very end, as a father on his son. That would be the conventional, sentimental image. But no, he was distracted. I don't think he even remembered I was there.

What follows is all madness, all hallucination, all transcendent of reason and therefore true.

I rage. I howl. I weep. I shovel the remains of my master Vaxos, along with the homunculus dung, into the ravenous furnace. The air is thick with *hanquil* fumes. The gods appear to me in the fire. I see them clearly, each wearing an exquisite mask of coloured glass, their true features too beautiful for any mortal to look upon and live.

And they speak to me. They tell me of the crystal-man who is to come, who is to redeem mankind and lead penitent Zhamiir back to holiness. It is my task to *build* this messiah, here, in the workshop, using the familiar tools of my trade.

And I set to work, fashioning an arm, a torso, another arm, all delicate constructions of spun and blown glass. I hold hot glass in my bare hands, burning my flesh almost through to the bone, but I do not think to wear gloves, for the crystal skull speaks to me in my master's voice, and it is Vaxos who explains to me that only through pain can true holiness be reached. Yes, now, dead and beyond, Vaxos is a *theomaniac*, a reasonless believer like myself, a slave to the gods.

Yes. I am very happy.

Once the serving maid bursts in, sees what is going on, and screams like a horn blasting at some endless festival. I silence her with the shovel and feed her to Vaxos, who devours her hands, so that I can see her fingers swimming in blood inside the crystal skull. The rest I heave into the furnace, stirring her soot and blood and charred bone into the glass.

When I am finished, the naked, gleaming body of the new messiah stands before me, perfectly formed, its muscles smooth, shoulders broad, hands ready to seize the world, glass joints cunningly worked so as to move without any friction.

It lacks only a head.

Reverently, I scramble up a stepladder and place the crystal skull on the massive shoulders. Then, in a moment of whimsy doubtless caused by the *hanquil* fumes, I top this all off with my master's favourite night-cap.

Silently, slowly, the thing moves around the room, the skull filled with fire now, its mouth whispering secrets from the far side of death, things even sceptical, obsessed Vaxos would never have admitted in life. To me, they are a wisdom beyond words, filling me with an understanding I cannot yet fathom.

Yes, it is like a life-long task to find the key to the treasure-box.

Or to make one.

The door to the street begins to char as my creation reaches to touch it. Hurriedly, I heave the bar aside.

The *Crystal-man* steps outside. Someone screams. He disperses the darkness of the alley like a rising sun. A company of the watch come up against him. The first man reaches out with his pike, but at the *Crystal-man's* touch both pike and man burst into holy flame and are transfigured.

The others run off, screaming, pikes clattering where dropped.

As the sun rises, we stand in the great forum of the city to greet the returning gods. The *Crystal-man* speaks with the voice of the earthquake. Shutters, flowerpots, and tiles tumble to the ground all around us. The multitudes assemble, and they hear the holy word. *Vaxos* has done this. *Vaxos* has been the instrument through which we are brought into a new age of righteousness and beauty. Through *Vaxos* the world is transformed.

So it would seem, had not *Ilvador* bungled.

As the sunlight fills the square, the light within the *Crystal-man* flickers and goes out. The thunderous voice is reduced to *pings* and a cracking sound, as, indeed, fissures spread through the whole of the glass body, which tumbles to the pavement and shatters into a cloud of brilliant dust.

I am just agile enough to catch the crystal skull and preserve it in my arms.

I am left standing there, trying to comprehend this catastrophe, as the crowd closes around, and there are men with pikes once more. But they remain uncertain, afraid to touch me, and at some distance they convey me into what used to be the imperial palace, where now the Nine Guardians of Public Rationality meet and confer in a great room ceilinged in gold.

I repeat my message, of the coming of the gods, but it is only *Ilvador* speaking, and the walls do not shake.

(I try to figure it out, as the *hanquill* fumes clear from my brain: some flaw in the glass, some false ingredient; perhaps the mere fact that I never *tempered* what I had wrought, and the sudden temperature change as it was exposed to the cool morning air caused it to crack?)

I hold up the crystal skull as evidence of what I am saying, but my burned and almost useless hands bungle once more.

I drop the skull, and it shatters at my feet, merely glass.

After this, of course, I am helpless and swiftly condemned for violating more laws than anyone can enumerate. I can only beg that I be burned, that I be cast into the very furnace of *Vaxos*, so I might join him in the country of the gods, which lies beyond the fires.

But they have caused me to be crucified. As I hang on my Tree of Pain, I am not afraid, because *Vaxos* is with me, transfigured and transformed, a glowing ghost, explaining to me at last that I've gotten it all wrong. I am not *his* instrument. No, he is *mine*. I am the new messiah, the messenger of the fires. I, *Ilvador*, whom the gods caused to be found on the doorstep in the snow. It was their doing. Their touch wiped out all memories not relevant to my mission.

I.

My heart is a heart of glass. That is my secret. I cannot die. I, too, under the influence of *hanquill* and the divine vision, inhaled through the blowing tube and filled myself with holy fire, with strange, powdered salts, with the soul of beauty, which for so long resided imprisoned within *Vaxos*.

In me beauty is liberated.

I am the Crystal-man.

Already a day has passed. I greet the sun for the last time. The earth begins to shake.

Darrell Schweitzer, born 1952, needs no introduction here: see the interview with him which precedes the above story.

Jason Van Hollander is an artist, resident in Pennsylvania, who has written a number of other fantasies, both solo and in collaboration with Darrell – “the best team since Burke and Hare,” he remarks.



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CREATORS OF SCIENCE FICTION, 7:

E.E. “DOC” SMITH

Brian Stableford

Edward E. Smith, Ph.D., was the man who invented space opera. Many writers before him had written tales of space travel – most of them journeys to the moon or Mars – and a few of their heroes had gone further afield than the solar system, but most imaginary voyagers who had embarked upon interstellar odysseys had done so in the spirit of the *voyages extatiques* penned by the French astronomer Camille Flammarion, rapt with wonder at the immensity and magnificence of the universe. One very obscure British scientific romance – Robert William Cole’s *The Struggle for Empire* (1900) – had looked forward to a day when the all-conquering British Empire might extend as far as Sirius but no one had ventured to suggest that the entire sidereal system might one day serve as a gigantic playground for pioneers until Smith wrote *The Skylark of Space*.

Smith completed the text of *The Skylark of Space* in 1920, when he was 30 years old, having started it five years earlier in collaboration with Lee Garby, the wife of a neighbour. He submitted it to numerous book publishers and pulp magazines, but it was consistently rejected until the specialist science-fiction pulps came into being in the late 1920. Smith became one of a precious handful of writers who had already produced work that was too bizarre to find a home elsewhere but could immediately be slotted into place within the nascent genre, helping to define its field. Stanton A. Coblentz and “John Taine” (Eric Temple Bell) were other such writers but neither was to

provide such an important precedent as Smith. Although Taine’s *The Time Stream* – which was written a decade earlier than its publication in 1931 – was equally daring after its own particular fashion it could not have the same explosive impact on a reader’s imagination as *The Skylark of Space*.

It was probably *Amazing’s* then editor, T. O’Conor Sloane, who insisted that Smith should add his doctorate to his byline. The



editors of the early sf magazines were very anxious to give the impression that they were not merely marketing one more brand of pulp fiction and they made the most of whatever scientific credentials their writers had. The fact that Smith was a food scientist specializing in doughnut mixes was to cause much sarcastic comment in years to come but he was not guilty of any real dissimulation in parading his qualification; he never made any strenuous attempt to pretend that

The Skylark of Space was a realistic novel of the future.

By the time *The Skylark of Space* actually appeared in print, in the August-October 1928 issues of *Amazing Stories*, Smith’s invention had been partly duplicated by Edmond Hamilton, the first of whose tales of the Interstellar Patrol began simultaneous serialization in the August 1928 issue of *Weird Tales*. Hamilton’s series, however, consisted of tales of a distant future inhabited by men with bizarre names and superhuman proclivities. While they were certainly not rhapsodic *voyages extatiques* they were decisively distanced from the world of the reader. Smith’s story began in exactly that world; its opening paragraph dispatched a copper bath coated with a previously-unknown metal into the interstellar wilderness, hurtling through space with breathtakingly casual panache. Readers could identify with Smith’s Richard Seaton with a ready ease that could not be duplicated in contemplating the exploits of the Interstellar Patrol – and the importance of that readiness of identification, especially for young readers, should not be underestimated.

The Skylark series proper consists of three volumes, the original serial being followed by *Skylark Three* (*Amazing*, August-October 1930) and *Skylark of Valeron* (*Astounding*, August 1934-February 1935). A fourth novel, *Skylark DuQuesne*, was serialized in *If* in 1965 but Smith was in his 70s by then and science fiction – including space opera – had become far more sophisticated; the addendum to the series

had nothing to recommend it but nostalgia-appeal.

It is difficult for today's readers, who are fully accustomed to the use of galactic empires as narrative stages, to appreciate the impact which the opening paragraph of *The Skylark of Space* had on its contemporary readers. By the same token, young people who find no difficulty at all in orientating themselves with the plots of *Star Trek* and *Babylon-5* are bound to find the clean-cut Seaton, his pal Martin Crane and their respective girlfriends a trifle unconvincing as heroes shaped for such a stage. The villains of the Skylark series – big businessmen with political ambitions, soon to be aided and eventually replaced by wave after wave of ugly aliens – have not been so rapidly superseded by the evolution of space operatic cliché, but the author's blithe assumption that genocide is the appropriate solution to most diplomatic problems ("Humanity *über alles* – *homo sapiens* against all the vermin of the universe!" Seaton cries, as he sets out to save the humans of Valeron from the depredations of chlorine-breathing amoebas) is bound to seem crass as well as crude in a post-Hitler era. In its original incarnation, however, the series was possessed of a remarkable and unprecedented exuberance which transported many of its readers into imaginative *terra incognita*.

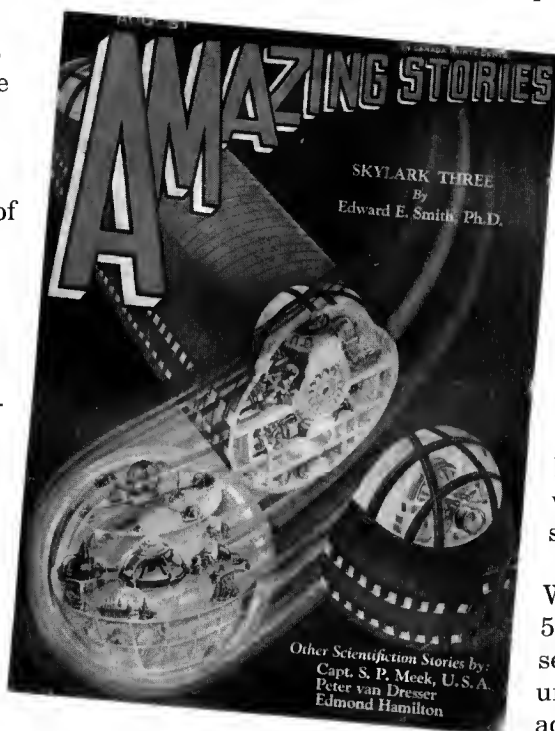
The Skylark series is a straightforward and unashamed power-fantasy which took that underrated art-form to a new extreme. Seaton continually trades in his starships for bigger and better ones with much-increased firepower (usually described in terms of the mastery of new "orders" of radiation). Although his personality remains stubbornly boyish his mind becomes a sponge for the accumulated wisdom of whole races, increasing his personal capabilities to the point at which he can take on disembodied beings of "pure intelligence" – a conventional representation of the ultimate end of evolution – and

beat them at their own game. At the end of the third volume he bottles up these inconvenient adult-substitutes with "Blackie" DuQuesne in a prison of pure force, exiling them to the very edge of the universe (where they remained, incapable of disrupting his good clean fun, until they were required to provide leverage for the plot of the belated fourth volume).

It is the subjugation of all the series' science-fictional ideas to the cause of juvenile power-fantasy that establishes *The Skylark of Space* and its sequels as the true progenitors of space opera. Edmond Hamilton's space operas are just as wild in their inventions but they retain a shadowy respect for scientific method and a subtle undercurrent

chronicling the adventure of Richard Seaton. As befit their collective title, in the Skylark series he deployed his pseudoscientific jargon as a straightforward mask for magic and miracles.

Smith was not incapable of writing space operas of a slightly more restrained kind, nor was he unwilling to do so. *The Spacehounds of I.P.C.* (1931), which was serialized in *Amazing* after *Skylark Three*, uses its pseudo-scientific notions in a manner much more reminiscent of Campbell, who had made his debut a year earlier. *Triplanetary* (1934) – which he wrote for the higher-paying *Astounding*, then edited by Harry Bates, but had to divert to *Amazing* when the Clayton magazine chain collapsed – also plays with its ideas in a more scrupulous and respectful fashion. Significantly, neither novel extends its action beyond the inner solar system, and their reception by readers was sufficiently lukewarm to ensure that Smith then went back to doing what he did best. When *Astounding* began publication again, under the aegis of F. Orlin Tremaine, he completed the Skylark trilogy in the most grandiose fashion he could contrive, and then he went on to plan a new series which would be more grandiose still: the Lensman series.



of adult cynicism – both of which were to be dutifully elaborated in subsequent contributions to the sub-genre by John W. Campbell, Jr, and Jack Williamson. None of these later writers were bashful in their employment of marvelous superscience, but none of them ever showed the same level of conscienceless disrespect as Smith did in the Skylark series. Despite the Ph.D. which his editors continued to append to his byline Smith did not pay the slightest lip-service to the limits of actual possibility while he was

When it was reprinted in 1950-54 as a set of books the Lensman series was expanded to six volumes (and some later reprints added *The Vortex Blaster* [1941-2; fix-up 1960] as a seventh, on the woefully inadequate grounds that it was set in the same universe). The book series begins with an extensively-revised *Triplanetary* and continues with a new volume, *First Lensman* (1950), which connects the revamped *Triplanetary* to the four volumes of which the series had initially consisted. These four volumes are based on the magazine serials *Galactic Patrol* (*Astounding*, September 1937-February 1938); *Gray Lensman* (*Astounding*, October 1939-January 1940); *Second-Stage Lensman* (*Astounding*, November

1941-February 1942) and *Children of the Lens* (Astounding, November 1947-February 1948).

The first of these six volumes begins with the revelation that a cataclysmic coalescence of two galaxies in the distant past precipitated a conflict between the humanoid Arisians and the monstrous Eddorians, who began a long war for control of the many new planets spawned by the event. The Arisians planned to build a galaxy-wide civilization while the Eddorians sought to subjugate all worlds to their totalitarian rule. An Arisian group-mind named Mentor initiated and supervised a special breeding-programme intended to produce beings capable of battling the Eddorians, using the human inhabitants of Earth as raw material.

After brief interludes set in Atlantis, Rome and the arenas of three World Wars, the book version of *Triplanetary* describes the Eddore-inspired assault led by the Adepts of Jupiter against the human-dominated inner planets of the solar system, causing them to unite – and, after their victory, to set in train plans for human expansion into the galaxy. In *First Lensman* humans make contact with Arisia, where Mentor arranges that Virgil Samms, the founder of the Galactic Patrol, comes into possession of the Lens: a device which serves as a universal translator. Each individual lens is a semi-living entity attuned to a single wearer; it defies all attempts at analysis or duplication. Armed with lenses, the elite members of the Galactic Patrol fight against the various criminal activities inspired and organized by Eddore's agents.

The four volumes which comprise the main part of the series tell the story of Kimball Kinnison and Clarrissa MacDougall (MacDougall was the maiden name of Smith's own wife). This couple is the penultimate product of Arisia's breeding programme, whose union eventually brings forth the children destined to destroy Eddore. *Galactic Patrol* describes how the newly-graduated Kinnison fights the pirates of

Boskone, winning a spectacular victory against enormous odds. In *Gray Lensman*, gifted with new mental powers by advanced Arisian training, Kinnison carries the fight to the Boskonians, eventually penetrating the defences of their home planet Jarnevon.

In *Second-Stage Lensman* Kinnison, having discovered that a much deeper conspiracy lies behind the power of Boskone, traces that activity back to the planets Lyrane II and Lonabar. Clarrissa MacDougall becomes the first female wearer of the Lens in order to work with the matriarchal Lyrans, and discovers the role played in their affairs by the Eich and the Thralians, whose interstellar empire is ruled by Alcon. Kinnison manages to assassinate Alcon, but his initial attempts to take control of the Thralian empire are thwarted when Prime Minister Fossten – the power behind Alcon's throne – reveals that he has powers as great as an Arisian's. Even so, Kinnison destroys this further adversary – without realizing that Fossten is, in fact, Gharlane of Eddore, Mentor's chief adversary since the dawn of their conflict.

In *Children of the Lens* the children of Kimball Kinnison and Clarrissa MacDougall – their son Christopher and four daughters, all partnered with second-stage lensmen – carry on the fight against the masters of Boskone. After suffering setbacks they go to Arisia to undergo the third stage of their training, which they are uniquely fitted to receive. They supervise the defence of Arisia against the Ploorans, the last of Eddore's pawns, then combine the collective mental power of the Patrol and Arisia for an assault on Eddore itself, where their father is being held prisoner. When this battle is won the children become the new Guardians of Civilization, while the Arisians pass on to a further phase of existence beyond the limits of time and space.

When the four magazine serials which comprised the original *Lensman* series were first pub-

lished it was not until the conclusion of the fourth and last part of the main series that its readers found out, along with the characters, that the Kinnisons' adventures had all been part of a greater scheme. For this reason, readers who first encounter the series in book form obtain a view of its contents and development very different from – and arguably much inferior to – that of its original readers.

The manner in which the pulp serials worked through an ever-escalating series of contexts represented a gradual but inexorable expansion of consciousness from the narrow confines of the inner solar system to the furthest horizons then imaginable. It was this steady but spectacular expansion of perspective which gave the serials their central role within the developing mythos of pulp science fiction and established them as the key exemplars of classic space opera. The book versions, which establish the largest scale of action within the prologue, distance the reader in much the same fashion as Hamilton's tales of the Interstellar patrol. As in the Skylark series, however, the "science" within the *Lensman* series is merely a mask for miracles, the lenses being magical devices whose function is simply to provide empowerment in measured stages.

In spite of its grandiose claim to constitute "The History of Civilization" (the original book publisher once issued a boxed set bearing that collective title) the main sequence of the *Lensman* series is a straightforward allegory of maturation. It is clearly a product of the era in which fear of organized crime first gave prolific birth to the mythology of the all-powerful mafia (and it is also an embodiment of the American Dream of universal conquest by means of superweapons which is described in detail by H. Bruce Franklin in *War Stars*, 1988) but this is incidental to its real narrative thrust. The four-volume novel is, essentially, a "boys' book" which does no more and no less than all boys' books do, mapping

out a route from present powerlessness to future power and offering elaborate counsel as to the wisdom of using that inevitable inheritance constructively.

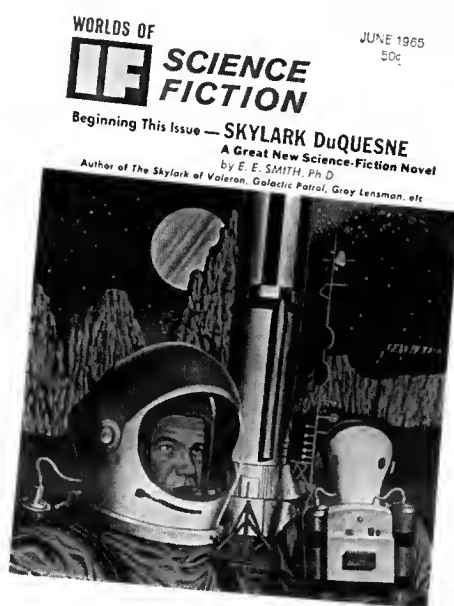
Shorn of its fanciful embellishments, the plot of the main sequence describes how young Kimball Kinnison graduates from school, is gifted with the responsibilities and prerogatives of a new adult, gets a girl and falls in love, learns to refine his powers and privileges, brings up his kids while his own kindly "parents" helpfully look on, and eventually passes the torch of responsibility on to them while his erstwhile Mentor follows the path of destiny into the mysterious world beyond life. As in the myriad allegories of maturation which nowadays constitute the bulk of genre fantasy, the business of learning to juggle authority and responsibility is plagued by many demons, whose evil is represented as a generalized and deep-seated force from whose fountainhead such phenomena as smuggling, piracy and war all spring.

Like all fantasies of this ilk, the Lensman series is stridently and conservatively moralistic, aiming to inculcate in its young readers not merely a reasoned hatred of evil but a reflexive emotional repulsion. It is not ashamed to use such elementary strategies as labelling its villains with expressions of disgust (Eich!, Ploor! etc). It is addressed very frankly to the immature, and ought not to be judged by the standards of adult literature.

When he had finished the Lensman series, with an extravagant flurry of collapsing galactic empires, there was no further stage for Smith to explore. Indeed, the last of the four serials – which appeared six years after the third, delayed in the writing by Smith's war-time stint in a munitions factory – was neither promoted nor received with the same enthusiasm as its predecessors. Between 1942 and 1948 *Astounding* had undergone a sea-change, partly due to John W. Campbell's crusade to make genre sf more responsible to known sci-

ence and partly due to the endorsement lent to that crusade by the advent of the Atomic Age, whose dilemmas and prospects sf had anticipated more cleverly than anyone had expected.

Smith spent the next few years revising and consolidating the book version of the Lensman series, and he also revised his other pulp novels for book publication. Ten years passed before he began a new venture, and when he did so he made every effort to accommodate it to the new context, but he could not do it. Perhaps he was simply too old to learn new tricks; whatever the reason, *The Galaxy Primes*, serialized in *Amazing* in 1959, was devoid of any real



narrative drive and gave the impression of being an inept pastiche of A. E. van Vogt. Smith wrote one more story for *Astounding*, "Sub-space Survivors" (1960), but Campbell rejected its sequel, which was eventually issued in tandem with it in the book *Sub-space Explorers* (1965). It is not at all surprising that after revising a novel left behind by one of his admiring fans, E. Everett Evans, Smith then decided – in spite of the fact that he had almost lost the use of his eyes to cataracts – to revert to the first imaginative territory he had pioneered by writing *Skylark Duquesne*. Its serial version appeared in print mere weeks before his death.

It astonished many readers and critics – who regarded Smith as a virtual dinosaur and his last literary products as a set of embarrassing failures – that the books of the Lensman series enjoyed a spectacular renewal of their popularity when they were re-released in paperback editions in the late 1960s. Indeed, they proved so very successful that the 1970s saw a concerted attempt to generate the same kind of boom in second-hand Smithiana that had previously been engineered in connection with the works of Robert E. Howard. A fragment which had appeared in *If* in 1964 as "The Imperial Stars" was completed by Stephen R. Goldin and became the first of a ten-volume series. Two short stories from 1953-4 starring "Lord Tedric" became the basis for a four-volume series by Gordon Eklund. New titles were added to the Lensman series by William B. Ellern and longtime fan David A. Kyle. Lloyd Arthur Eshbach – who had published the book versions of most of Smith's novels – supplied a sequel to *Subspace Explorers*.

None of this material is of any real interest, nor was any of it successful even though the presence of Smith's name on the covers guaranteed sales for a while. When the books in question began to pile up in second-hand outlets, unsaleable at any price, the whole enterprise came to seem rather absurd. If one considers the four Kimball Kinnison stories in isolation, however – or in association with the first three Skylark novels – it is not so very surprising that a new generation of teenage readers was able to find them exciting and inspiring in spite of the fact that their form had been unwisely altered and their imaginative apparatus had become horribly dated. It is no coincidence that the same era saw the phenomenal success of paperback editions of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and the spectacular rebirth of fantasy as a paperback genre. The imaginative apparatus of Tolkienesque fantasy was even more outdated than that of Smith's space operas – but that was, in a sense, the whole

point of the exercise.

The function of fairyland and all its literary analogues is that they provide an arena where an adult teller of a tale can meet a naive reader on equal terms, unconfused by the fact that the teller's experience of the world is far more varied and refined than his hearer's. That was what Smith made of the universe of stars: an arena of adventure, where the limitations of scientific plausibility had no relevance at all. Any tale set in the real world is bound to be experienced very differently by an adult and a child, because they bring such different stocks of knowledge to the understanding of it, but a tale set in Middle-earth or the Galactic Empire is neutral ground; all that is or can be known about it is the text.

It is for this reason that the Lensman series was – and to some extent still is – so wonderfully *available* to unsophisticated readers. Within this context, we can easily appreciate that the series is indeed a rather special

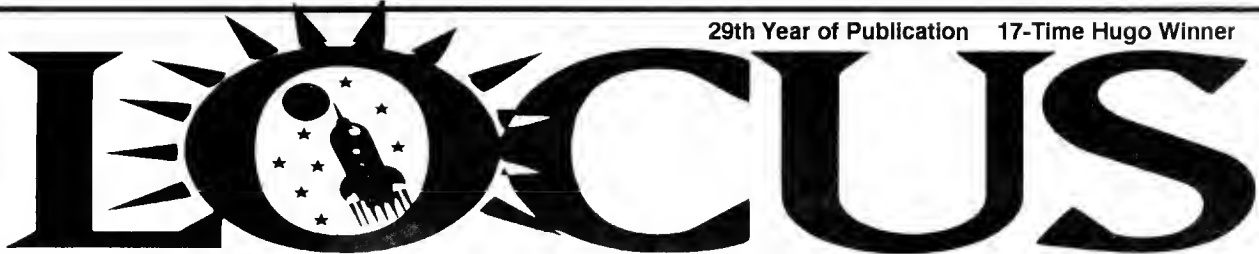
work, for the imagination whose triumphs it celebrates is one that looks forwards rather than backwards, and outwards rather than inwards. Adult literature, which is inevitably devoted to self-conscious introspection and to historical understanding, can find little room for such endeavours as the Lensman series, but children will always be able to accommodate them.

Modern space opera has, of course, evolved to become much more sophisticated than its remotest ancestors. The politics of the galactic empire were recomplexified and refined by writers like Isaac Asimov and Poul Anderson, and their influence has fed through to the TV shows which are now the principal format of the sub-genre. It is arguable, however, that the similarities are more important than the differences. Modern space opera still consists largely of allegories of maturation and its most popular forms still employ pseudo-scientific jargon as a mask

to conceal all the hoariest clichés of magical fantasy. Richard Seaton's problematic battles with godlike beings of "pure intelligence" are still replayed, time and time again, and avatars of Blackie DuQuesne continue to play their mediating role in such struggles.

There is nowadays a kind of space opera which can qualify as adult literature, which has made the vast stage of the Galactic Empire available for thought-experiments of considerable subtlety and evident incisiveness – an opportunity which has been taken up by such thoroughly adult writers as Ursula K. Le Guin and Iain M. Banks – but the obvious merits of that kind of space opera should not entirely blind us to the merits of the other: the space opera which provided a modern alternative to fairyland. The work he did towards that end fully entitles Edward E. Smith, Ph.D., to be considered one of the most notable creators of science fiction.

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Unlike a lot of modern fantasy, which is self-consciously of the genre and shows it in cynically formulaic writing or a frenetic cultivation of individuality, much of the charm of Sarah Ash's *SongspINNERS* (Orion, £16.99) lies in its extreme unself-consciousness (which is almost all it shares with her earlier and inferior *Moths to a Flame*, reviewed in *Interzone* 98). Although her range is narrower, and the style and mood are dissimilar, I was often reminded of Bridget Wood. Like Wood, Ash has a sound understanding of the mechanics of the language and a fine ear for its rhythms, and presents what is essentially a romance from linked male and female viewpoints; her opening situation is just as heavily contrived, but her control of pace is equally good, and her plot-mechanisms creak rather less.

The setting is a world based on Europe in the early 19th century, where the country of Allegond has succumbed to religious fundamentalism of the usual joyless and intrusive sort. This is bad news for Amaru Khassian, who has written a religious opera which offends in much the same way as did Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. His opera house is torched around him, his hands are crippled in the flames and he is forced to flee across the border to a spa town named (in a characteristic Ash word-game) Sulien. There he meets Oriol, the female lead, a young girl mad for music – and there's the rub, for she is a throwback to an extinct race. She has the typical rainbow irises of the Lifhendil and an ability to pick up music telepathically, which makes her the ideal amanuensis for a composer who can neither write nor play a keyboard, but it seems likely that she will succumb to the confusingly named Accidie (dementia followed by death) which killed her mother, and that exposure to music will trigger it. Her father is therefore anxious that she should have nothing to do with her principal joy in life.

Meanwhile, male and female Allegondish agents are seeking Khassian, and meanwhile an elderly archivist believes she may have a clue to Oriol's true nature. There's a lot going on, but Ash balances the plot elements extremely well. The characters are all rather larger than life, but they're carefully visualized and none is a mere archetype; all have suffered in various ways, and there's a sense that what they are now is consistent with their specific suffering. The picture of a young virgin falling unwillingly in love with an older man of difficult temperament who will never, by the nature of his injuries, be able to caress her as

Breathless Charm

Chris Gilmore

she deserves, is presented movingly and without mawkishness; almost equally good is the picture of a man compelled by circumstances to confront his own faith with an unstated view to abandoning it – for why else should he carry out such an examination? – and with it the justification for most of what he has done throughout his adult life, not least to himself.

Despite the Langtreyesque milieu and an occasionally breathless style, this is such a huge improvement on her first novel that I'm almost tempted to believe Ash read my review and took it to heart – *abeste, Sathanas!* What writer ever did that?

I've remarked before that you never know what to expect from A. A. Attanasio. He has always experimented with style and form, and his latest offering, *The Dark Shore* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99), looks like a cold-blooded attempt to synthesize the ultimate heroic fantasy while simultaneously extending the limits of the language – an enterprise to which he is less than equal.

It's set on the reasonably peaceful and happy world of Irth (note the echo of Gene Wolfe, though it's most unlike Earth or Urth being, *inter alia*, flat) which is threatened by a malevolent Dark Lord (note the echo of Tolkien), who comes boiling in out of nowhere surrounded by legions of cacodemons (not to be confused with eudemons) who are equally invulnerable to conventional weapons and the everyday magic of Irth (called Charm). What is to be done? No one has any idea, but if you can't fight it's as well to hide – especially if you're the Margravess Jyoti, sole adult survivor of a family which the Dark Lord seems especially keen to extirpate.

Jyoti and her wimpish younger brother Poch spend well over half the book looking for somewhere safe and someone who may help them, but theirs is not the only viewpoint; the philosopher/thief Dogbrick, the thief and dreamer Ripcat, the waif Tiwi, the Wizarduke Drev and the weapons-master/sorcerer Caval are all on the move, and though one presumes from early on that all will ultimately link to vanquish the Dark Lord, there's no sense of joint purpose nor even a hidden design. The principal suspense arises from the possibility that Poch, in his cowardice, will attempt to buy his own life by betraying his sister.

A book with this sort of structure demands to be read with more than usually close attention, from which it follows that it should have been written with at least as much. In this Attanasio fails from time to time, mainly through careless choice of words. A paragraph beginning "Bawling cacophonously, the cacodemon fled," can only detract from the seriousness of the occasion. But he also attempts a clotted, rococo style very unlike that of *The Moon's Wife* or *The Last Legends of Earth* and in places reminiscent of E. R. Eddison. So on the next page we get: "The radiations of howls and cries permeated the dark hours and drenched sleep

SARAH ASH



SONGSPINNERS

FROM DEATH SPRINGS
A FABULOUS FANTASY

with dreams filthy with danger and fright." The meanings of many words, especially adjectives, are distorted, which is all right in principle, but not when you're a bit weak on the past participles of strong Germanic verbs.

This sort of consideration aside, the book wends its way agreeably enough from incident to incident, and as most of them are vividly described, his characters are well differentiated and the complexities of his world emerge in the right order, the time passes pleasantly enough. The Dark Lord is an especially fine creation, being at heart a squalid little man who can never transcend his low origins – in contrast to the slum-dwelling Tiwi and Dogbrick, whose natural nobility is recognized and accepted by the highest-born. Had Attanasio not chosen to show off, this could have been a very superior heroic fantasy; as it is, its stylistic pretensions will irritate those who don't care for such things, while actively annoying those who do.

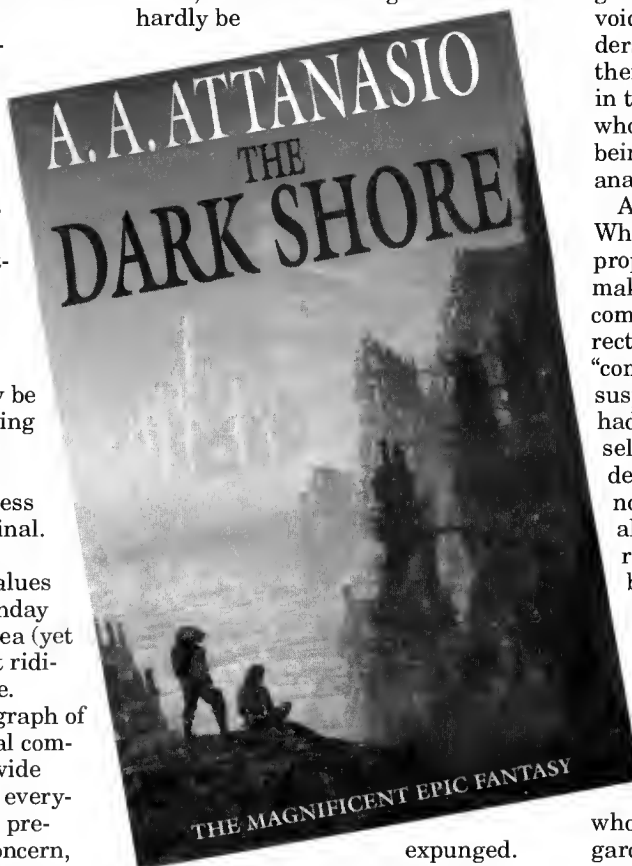
And by way of complete contrast,

Biograph by John White (Fractal Press, £7.99, B-format), is the most staidly written novel I can remember meeting. It's presented as the autobiography of a young man called Roath Stand, written in at least partial expiation/explanation for a crime which remains unspecified until the last few pages, and though his world could hardly be more distant from the fast-living materialism of cyberpunk, its vision of the information-drenched 22nd century is no less valid, and if nothing else original.

It's a world in which all the earnest, lower-middle-class values which one associates with Sunday School, lace doilies and high tea (yet still feels slightly guilty about ridiculing) have come to dominate. They're facilitated by the Biograph of the title, an advanced personal computer plugged into the worldwide information net which makes everyone's business accessible, and presumes it to be of legitimate concern, to everyone else. As every person's (and especially every young person's) every act is public property, everyone feels entitled to pass comment upon it "for his own good," and to enter those judgements into the permanent record. The matters of greatest interest are: to what extent do his actions demonstrate a proper appreciation of his civic responsibilities? and how has he voted in the innumerable referenda on all topics, from the most trifling to the most momentous, around which all social life revolves? To have participated as fully as possible is good, but to have contributed some

feature to the ultimate majority decision is best.

Roath is not a natural rebel; he tries to be good, and succeeds well enough at first, but he grows up under a dilemma. Shortly after his birth an uncle gives a sample of his DNA to a computer, which matches it with all the world's girl babies to see who would make the perfect wife for Roath. It comes up with two names, and the uncle publishes them – to the toe-curling embarrassment of all three, but the knowledge can hardly be



expunged. One (Rosie) lives nearby in Yorkshire, one (Ingo) on Culminatorics, a hollow asteroid near the Moon, and Roath can hardly ignore either; by the age of 22 he still doesn't know which he really wants, or if either wants him. Both are attractive, but young people in good mental and physical health who have suffered no disfigurement are likely to be attractive. To allow your sex-life to be determined by a machine is demeaning, but to disregard what may prove to be priceless information is foolish. When Roath finally manages to shed his virginity it counts as

a no small achievement, the more so as the Biograph does its best to spoil the occasion with a questionnaire as to exactly what has been "contracted" between the consensual partners.

While this protracted rite of passage is proceeding, a vital decision is drawing nigh: Culminatorics is being converted for interstellar exploration, and Ingo is going. Roath will be welcome, but Rosie is certainly staying on Earth. I have no intention of revealing the ending, but it's presented with considerable skill – White sustains the suspense admirably, only to introduce a *deus ex machina* in the last few pages. But even that's forgivable; it's an interesting idea in itself, though impossible to develop from that position.

Other aspects work less well, but are to an extent inherent in the book's assumptions. The characters all talk in a stilted manner with few contractions; that may be realistic, given their intimate relations with voice-operated computers, but it renders them less sympathetic, as does their habit of haranguing each other in the high-minded fashion of people who know that their every word is being recorded for dispassionate peer-analysis later on.

A minor but persistent irritant is White's evident blind spot over the proper use of hyphens, which can make for momentary confusion. A competent editor would have corrected this, and his frequent use of "compunction" for "compulsion", but I suspect on internal evidence that he had no editor and that this book is self-published. If that's the case he deserves all the more credit for a novel of considerable virtue that's all his own work. Self-publishing is rarely the road to wealth or fame, but if he has more work in progress I hope some major imprint will have the nous to take him up.

There's a sort of hyper-realist high-tech future where machines do almost all the real work, the ruling class consists wholly of machiavellian industrial oligarchs and Hooray-Henrys with nasty habits, the demoralized ex-workers are sunk in apathy, squalor, drugs and crime, and the middle class has degenerated into a neurasthenic sub-caste of lackeys and technicians. I wouldn't like to guess how far back you could trace its roots, but I first began to note it as a sub-genre in Ken Bulmer's tales of Wingknife Bartram, the genial freelance murderer. Wilhelm Baird's *Clipjoint* (Ace, \$4.99; Roc, £4.99) is very much of that tradition, and proves yet again that in Hell is all manner of delight.

The novel's a sequel to *Crashcourse*, from 1993 (which should really be

BOOKS



REVIEWED

read first, as Baird offers few data-dumps), and features mainly the survivors therefrom. Cassandra Blaine, the tough-gal narrator, is still with Mokey her nice-guy lover, but their circumstances are much improved. His sculpture (which as described by Baird sounds like a load of pretentious rubbish, though that may be accidental) is much in demand, and she is happy working as his amanuensis and business-manager. Of course, they're both still mourning for Dosh, their mutual lover who got killed in the last book, but life goes on - except that life seems to be going on to an unnatural extent. Who is this person who looks exactly like Dosh and is doing what Dosh always wanted to do? and is doing it for Coelocanth, the great corporate baddie?

So they toddle back down from the enervating luxury of their private asteroid base to investigate, helped by their good friends Hallway, the illegal armourer, Swordfish, the truly professional gang-boss and his side-kick Dribble, half dog, half teenager, and with all the least endearing habits of both. What they find is much the sort of thing that people find in horror-thrillers like *Coma* and *Side Effect*, so there's plenty of mayhem, and plenty of opportunity for Baird to describe glitz and sleaze with appropriate relish.

It's very well done if you like this sort of thing (I did myself in my teens) but serious reading it isn't. The characters are all paper-thin, the socioeconomic setup is distinctly suspect, and the emotional relationships would be excessive for a Jacobean revenge tragedy. Although Cassandra has a distinctive voice, her wise-cracking tone lacks variation and her habit of dropping relative pronouns in the narrative gets wearing after a short while. A style of dialogue that works if you're nerving yourself up for a dangerous enterprise or facing down the heavies sounds off-key when you're gingerly picking your way out of a monofilament net or mourning a friend.

What with that and the mandatory silly bit where Cassandra gets caught by the heavies who don't kill her out of hand but delay while they make a (literal) production of it, thereby allowing time for the cavalry to come over the hill, it should really be marketed as a juvenile - and might have been save that Coelocanth's principal sin is the manufacture of snuff movies, and Baird offers a vivid example of the sort of scene to be found therein. What with that and sundry other political incorrectitudes, *Clipjoint* will do nothing for admirers of Milly Molly Mandy, but I commend it to streetwise (or wannabe street-wise) brats of all ages from 14 up.

Chris Gilmore

BOOKS



REVIEWED

Round Things

Neil Jones

In *The Ringworld Throne* (Orbit, £16.99), Larry Niven returns to his most famous creation. When *Ringworld* appeared in 1970 it captured the awards - and the sf imagination. Not because it was a surpassingly good book: when Niven's engagingly motley crew were travelling hopefully towards this incredible construct it scored a full ten points on the sense of wonder scale - but once they arrived, the plot, and the wonders, faded. No, it was the Ringworld itself that beguiled.

A variation on the Dyson Sphere, the Ringworld is a strip of super-strong material in orbit about a Sol-type sun. It has walls a thousand miles high and the surface is sculpted - from underneath the mountains are hollow, the sea bulges. And it's BIG: its circumference is about the same as one complete orbit of the Earth around the sun, although it's only a mere 997,000 miles wide, equivalent to say 40 ironed-out Earths laid end-to-end. Which works out to a total surface area three million times the Earth's. It also has human inhabitants - or so we were led to believe when *Ringworld* came out - and that simply didn't square with the Known Space universe established in Niven's stories over the previous few years.

Although Niven never intended there to be a follow-up, success breeds sequels, and in 1980 *The Ringworld Engineers* appeared. Niven had had plenty of time to ponder the paradoxes he'd introduced to the Known Space background and so it turned out - very much more interestingly - that the Ringworlders weren't so human after all. Instead, they were fellow hominids, descended, like us humans, from Pak breeders.

Pak breeders? That brings us back again to the Known Space future history. Which is fair enough, because although *The Ringworld Throne* is forever going to be thought of as part

three of the Ringworld trilogy, Niven himself regards it as the fourth book in the Ringworld series - the first being *Protector*, which revealed how humans had evolved from the breeder stage of the Pak, a species that originated from a planet within the Galactic Core.

So, rather late in the day, Niven settled on Pak Protectors, the adult and formidably intelligent stage of the Pak lifeform, as the builders of the Ringworld. (But never convincingly; yes, they were probably up to the task, but how could they have co-operated for the immense length of time such an undertaking would have required? Plus lots more how-comes Niven never found answers for.) Anyway, in the vast Ringworld environment, the Pak breeders diverged into countless differently-specialized hominid species, many of them intelligent - such as the herbivorous Grass Giants, carnivorous Red Herders, the tech-using trader Machine People and the Ghouls, who rule the Ringworld night. And it was the notion of enormous *lebensraum* leading to co-existing sibling hominids that energized the sequel and made it superior to the earlier book - because it made it possible (well, almost) to grasp the Ringworld's sheer vastness. If Niven had shown us this on the Ringworld in the original book, it would have deserved all the awards and the acclaim it received.

To cap the series (and presumably at the time, Niven thought he had) Louis Wu, the human protagonist of all three books, saved the Ringworld from destruction - but at a terrible cost. Brought back for his second visit by a scheming alien, a puppeteer known as the Hindmost, Wu found the Ringworld threatened by orbital instability. Along with his companions, Wu fired the remaining attitude jets to stabilize it - but a trillion and a half sentients living along one section of the ring would die of radiation poisoning.

That was then; *The Ringworld Throne* is now. Years after the events of *The Ringworld Engineers*, a stranded, ageing Louis Wu is wandering the Ringworld, racked with guilt. But Niven, with yet more time to think things through, has a surprise in store for him: it turns out he didn't kill off quite so many sentients after all, thanks to the Hindmost. And the puppeteer needs Wu's help: there have been developments...

Unfortunately, apart from the scenes with Louis Wu, the first half of the novel is a pointless trek across the Ringworld hunting a vampire nest which adds a little local colour but barely forwards the plot at all. Had Louis Wu been one of the posse, the quest might have seemed more compelling. But instead we have a gaggle of representatives from a



range of different hominids – and, since nearly every native character has a name like Poopsquirtanodyne, just keeping track of who's who becomes almost comically difficult. Where was the editor? This section could have been made considerably more reader-friendly by getting Niven to a) trim the excess characters (there are lots!) and b) insert key-phrase references with each fresh mention of a character instead of relying on that "helpful" character list at the back.

Still, for the true Ringworld aficionado, the second half has its compensations – a three-cornered fight between Protector factions and an outclassed Hindmost, Louis Wu getting back into the action, plus some intriguing Known Space developments. No, Niven still hasn't convinced me the Pak could have co-operated long enough to have built the Ringworld – quite the reverse. In fact, by the end of the book, there are a lot more questions that require answers, so there's plenty of room for a further sequel. Let's hope there is one – because, faults and all, this is the closest Larry Niven has come in a very long time to the full-steam sf superstar form of his early years. And, yes, it's good to be back on the Ringworld – and in Known Space.

One parting shot about the English version of this book (not down to Larry Niven). The Ringworld is the sf icon of the last 20 or so years, and there have been some memorable illustrations of it – but the spaceship-against-blurry-blue-and-white fudge on the cover of this book (you've seen it – it's also the cover of *Interzone* 108) isn't one of them. Orbit, what possessed you?

From ultimate hard-sf construct, to soft-fantasy icon. In *Feet of Clay* (Gollancz, £15.99) we are, of course, back on the Discworld. More than that, since Terry Pratchett now has several series running within the greater one (Rincewind and Granny Weatherwax come to mind), we are back in the police-procedural domain of the City Guard, memorably introduced in *Guards! Guards!* and gloriously continued in *Men at Arms*. All the usual suspects are back in uniform – the recently-knighted Samuel Vimes, now law enforcement supremo for Ankh-Morpork, Captain (ex-Corporal) Carrot and his were-girlfriend, Angua, Sergeant Colon, Nobby, and the troll Detritus. There are new characters too, including a dwarf with a taste for lipstick and a gnome called Wee Mad Arthur.

Cartoon characters really, moving in a cartoon landscape. Pratchett sets them up that way – and at the same time he makes them come alive. So you'll be rooting for the idiotically noble Carrot and the were-worried

Angua to sort out their relationship problems, and for Vimes to nail the bad guy and score one for the ig-noble classes. Perhaps part of the trick is the way Pratchett persuades us that there is something new and on-going happening to his characters, even the ones we already know. That they have lives.

The story...? Yes, well, golems have got something to do with it – they're artificially-created beings who go around with words written on pieces of paper stuffed inside their head, not to mention a somewhat daunting work-ethic. Murders, yes, there are a few of those, including the one in the Dwarf bread museum. Then there are the enthusiastic attempts on Lord Vetinari's life, Corporal Nobbs's discovery of his noble ancestry, and the threat to Vimes's new social status. Rest assured, there's plenty of plot here to be going on with.

Pratchett devotees only need to be told that this is Pratchett on his customary form to know they will be joyously entertained. But for those of you who have not yet surrendered to the Pratchett phenomenon, the feeling you are left with on reaching the end of a Discworld book is the reading equivalent of that glow you have at the coffee and cognac stage of a sumptuous four-course meal in an exquisite restaurant deep in rural France. Because, besides the humour, the humanity, and even the wisdom, there's something evoked here politicians would sell their seats for: Pratchett's own special brand of the feel-good factor.

And not just on the Discworld. Also out is the third in Pratchett's Johnny Maxwell series, *Johnny and the Bomb* (Doubleday, £12.99). Johnny, who lives in the here and now, along with his pals, Bigmac, Yoles, Wobbler and Kirsty aka Kasandra, become involved with a time-travelling baglady called Mrs Tachyon who frequents the Blackburn Blitz in 1941. Yes, the book skirts the territory staked out by the TV series *Goodnight Sweetheart*, but no great cause for concern there; Pratchett's take on the idea is fresh enough. This series is aimed at children, but there's enough humour and gentle charm here for everyone to enjoy.

Neil Jones

The First Futuristic Utopia

Brian Stableford

Robert Darnton's *The Forbidden Best-sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (HarperCollins, £25) is a fascinating study of popular literature in the years leading up to the French Revolution, and is of interest to sf readers by virtue of the attention which it pays to Louis-Sebastien Mercier's *L'an 2440* (1771), part of whose text is reproduced – in a new translation – in an extensive appendix sampling the most widely-read illicit texts. Scholars of sf and utopian writing have long recognized *L'an 2440* as the first significant "euchronian" work – i.e., the first to place its vision of the ideal society in the future and to locate it in a familiar city (Paris), thus tacitly accepting a better world as a goal to be achieved rather than a model to be admired.

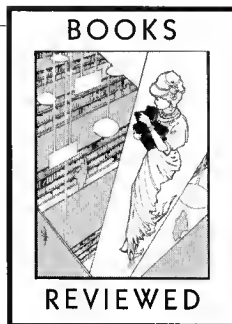
The figures which Darnton cites in his analysis of the circulation of illicit texts in the quarter-century preceding the Revolution suggest that *L'an 2440* was the most popular of all such works. He places Mercier fourth in his summation of the total sales of illicit publications, not far behind writers who were far more prolific and are nowadays far more prestigious. The first place in that table is awarded to Voltaire, the second to Holbach, although Rousseau's modest ninth place is partly due to the fact that one of his most popular books – *La nouvelle Héloïse* – was published legally.

Darnton's analysis of the text of *L'an 2440* dutifully points out that its revolutionary credentials are a little suspect. It is not presented as an actual vision of futurity (it carried the subtitle "A Dream if Ever There Was One"), nor does it advocate the abolition of the monarchy, being perfectly content to credit its not-so-very-adventurous social reforms to a philosopher king. Even so, the book carried far and wide the message that social reform was not merely highly desirable but *inevitable*: that it was part of the unfolding pattern of *progress*. The fact that nothing like it had ever been seen before increased its propagandistic effect dramatically. It was certainly not a blueprint for the Revolution but it did help to make the Revolution imaginable.

The most interesting aspect of Darnton's study is his painstaking reconstruction of the political and economic context in which *L'an 2440*

was issued. In order to be published legally books had to pass the gaze of a series of censors, whereupon they were issued with a royal stamp of approval, which served as a copyright-licensing device as well as a supposed guarantee of philosophical orthodoxy and literary quality. Darnton points out that the great majority of the products of the Enlightenment were denied this stamp of approval; their publication carried the risk of prosecution, with heavy penalties for conviction. In spite of this threat, illicit publishing thrived, albeit on the margins of respectability – and the authorities seem to have turned a blind eye to the greater part of such commerce.

One effect of this confused situation was that the text of *L'an 2440* was built up in layers, rafts of footnotes being added to the rather sketchy main narrative as the complicated equation of demand and risk facilitated a series of reprintings. This accretion of material eventually resulted in a very peculiar and frustratingly cumbersome text. But in spite of this handicap Mercier's book continued to outsell the other texts discussed in detail herein – which



Darnton groups under the headings "Philosophical Pornography" and "Political Slander." The samples which Darnton translates from *Thérèse Philosophique* (1748) and *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry* (1775) are far more readable than the sample taken from *L'an 2440* and far more subtle in their undermining of the *ancien régime*; however, no one but Mercier produced a text which blithely took it for granted that the unavoidable fate of the political system put together by Louis XIV was to be consigned to the dustbin of history.

It is, of course, possible that modern scholars of sf will feel a slight twinge of regret as they read this book, because it will remind them forcefully

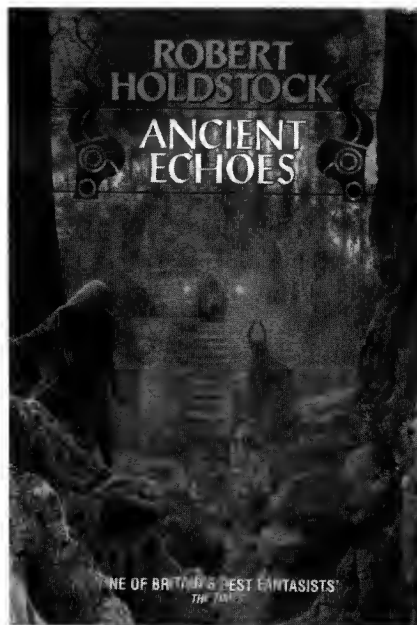
of the power which futuristic speculation once had, but now has not. As the 18th century reached its climax France was the powerhouse of progress, and the most widely-read text there was *L'an 2440*, the first book to compile an anticipatory vision of the way in which technological and moral progress would interact to produce a better future. A century later, when the cutting edge of progress had been transferred to the USA, the most widely-read text there was Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888), which attempted exactly the same task. Now, as the 20th century reaches its climax, images of the future have become so familiar and so trivial as to be utterly contemptible – and the great majority of the voluntarily-illiterate viewers who have replaced the readers of yore have consigned the idea of progress to the same dustbin as the *ancien régime*. Mercifully, philosophers know well enough how to distance themselves from their subject-matter, and even those who live in barrels have ceased worrying unduly about the eclipse of the Enlightenment.

Brian Stableford

Robert Holdstock's *Ancient Echoes* (Voyager, £15.99) shows a new aspect of his continuing interest in myths and their origins. The author has described himself as "a hoper rather than a believer" in Jungian archetypes. In this novel, one of his best to date, he has collaborated with a psychologist friend to explore the mind of Jack Chatwin, a man haunted throughout his life by echoes from mankind's distant past and which appear to him in the forms of a masked human pair fleeing vengeance for some ancient crime. "Greyface," the male apparition, breaks through into the "real" world and menaces Jack's beloved daughter Natalie. To save her Jack agrees to participate in a research project involving regression into the unconscious using an experimental machine-assisted form of lucid dreaming known as Midax. He travels into his own head – eerily observed, measured and charted by his researcher wife and her ex-lover. Once in the "Hinterland" of Jack's mind we are very much back in the world of Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* series, where myth becomes reality. But in this novel the chief setting is not a wood but the semi-sentient and vengeful city of Glanum: archetype of Jericho, Noah's Ark and perhaps the Garden of Eden; sanctuary for the memory of extinct animals but swallower of other cities and predatory hater of dissident humans. And it chases them – literally – burrowing underground and then surfacing, gates yawning to engulf them. Jack

White Whale of a City

Elizabeth Counihan



encounters the city both in the past in his exploration of his own mind via the Midax equipment, and in the present waking world as a terrifying place of shadow superimposed on his own

home town, for it seems that Jack is a natural link between the past and the present.

Holdstock uses a whole host of archetypal myths in his story, many of them biblical and many, I am sure, which I failed to spot. His characters are, as usual, sympathetic and inclined to be tragic. Jack himself is too afraid of Greyface's power over Natalie to fight back at his tormentor. I suppose one cannot condemn such behaviour in someone who truly believes that his child's life is in danger but I have to admit that at times I felt like giving Jack a good shaking and telling him to behave like a man and punch the bad guy on the nose. Natalie and the other children in the story are, as is usual with Holdstock's child characters, wholly believable. In fact all the characters are interesting, from the mysterious Garth, who disappears into Glanum, to the sexy Eve-like Greenface and her cruel, desperate brother, Greyface. Holdstock aficionados will expect lots of weather, pungent odours and ancient ruins. They will not be disappointed. They will also be treated to icon-eating travellers, human sacrifice, forlorn lovers and lost lands and, best of all, the unforgettable description of the city of Glanum, the Great White Whale, as it ploughs through the countryside with Garth harpooned to its turrets like Captain Ahab. It's a great image, but if Glanum is a sanctuary don't tell the Home Secretary; it might give him the wrong idea.

Elizabeth Counihan



It puzzles me whenever Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling fail to pick up top honours for Best Anthology in the annual World Fantasy Awards. The value, size (usually around 250,000 words) and sheer eclecticism of their *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* collections (plus, of course, the newsy wisdom which permeates their lengthy essays and those from Ed Bryant, Will Shetterly and Emma Bull) is never short of essential. This year's volume – the ninth (St Martin's Press, \$27.95 hc, or \$17.95 pb) – is no exception.

Bearing all of the above in mind, it could, of course, be argued that maybe a *Year's Best* – any *Year's Best* – should not qualify for a top award. Should, for example, the latest *Now That's What I Call Music* volume pick up the Brit Award for best album? Or *Points of View* win the BAFTA for best television programme? Presumably not. Of course, particularly in the case of *Points of View*, it could be argued that the excerpted vignettes are not wholly contained pieces and therefore such a series of clips does not qualify for award recognition. But many of the stories in a *Year's Best* collection, too, are merely representations of someone else's vision – be it a magazine's particular ethos, an anthology's stated theme or an editor's own abilities or powers of persuasion.

It's all very moot point-wise but in light of the quality in Datlow's and Windling's collection any anthology editor who does not have a book out or due out this year can breathe a sigh of relief; equally, any book that happens to take the rosette over this one will have to be a very special collection indeed. Datlow and Windling have clearly put in an impressive amount of reading and research which has "unearthed" 41 of the very best – and, subjective though any such opinion inevitably is, this year's line-up is state-of-the-art in qualitative terms – short works in the field. In addition to Stephen King's excellent three-courser, "Lunch at the Gotham Cafe" (an inevitable but highly justified inclusion from *Dark Love*) the collection features: Amy Tan's "Young Girl's Wish" (*The New Yorker*); A.S. Byatt's "A Lamia in the Cevennes" (*Atlantic Monthly*); Ursula K. Le Guin's "Ether Or" (*Asimov's*); Michael Marshall Smith's chilling "More Tomorrow" (*Dark Terrors*); Marcia Guthridge's amusing "Henry V Part 2" (*Paris Review*); Chris Kenworthy's "Because of Dust" (*The Third Alternative*); Stuart Dybeck's hauntingly erotic "Paper Lantern" (*New Yorker*); and Eileen Kernaghan's delightful "Dragon Rain" which first appeared in *Magic*, a small-press anthology conceived, edited and published (with some help from her father) by a 12-year-old in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

This really *is* the best. Better clear another spot on the mantelpiece, ladies!

No Contest

Peter Crowther

Of course, everyone can think of a story that should have been included in a "Best of" anthology... after all, you can't please everyone. But if there is one story that absolutely cried out for inclusion in Datlow and Windling's book it's Martin Simpson's "Last Rites and Resurrections" from one of last year's issues of Andy Cox's superb *The Third Alternative* magazine.

Well, while Ellen and Terri passed it by, Andy himself recognized its worth and used it to kick off his first compilation of notable stories from past issues of the mag... and he used it as the title (albeit with the use of an ampersand instead of the word "and," presumably because otherwise the title would have spread onto two decks).

Last Rites & Resurrections (TTA Press, £5.99) is every bit as required reading as the first book in this column. Forget such misleading sobriquets as "alternative," "slipstream" and "cutting edge" and just substitute "high quality." *TTA*, to use its accepted short-

form, is fast becoming the *Granta* of fantastic literature magazine-publishing, leading the field of those publications and editors which and who are trying to take the triteness and the cliché out of horror, and make it a part of contemporary fiction.

Thus you won't find too many monsters here – although there are few unpleasantries waiting around the door-frame – and nary an alien in sight. Here, the ghosts are often memories and the blackness is more grey in colour... the gnarled hand (while equally if not more disturbing than the usual variety) sporting an altogether subtler texture. With stories from all the usual suspects – Nicholas Royle, Conrad Williams, Joel Lane *et al* – each one turning in the very best of even their own high standards, *Last Rites & Resurrections* features some exciting work from completely new names (at least to this reviewer). So, in addition to the afore-mentioned Martin Simpson (with his first sale!), mention must be made of Simon Avery's "Blue Nothings" (inspired, the bio notes say, by the work of Nick Drake) and the exceptional "The Angel of the Moor" by Lawrence Dyer. Dyer has a collection slated for future release from *TTA* and, on the strength of this tale, nobody can afford to miss it. But then, nobody can really afford to miss this current volume... or, indeed, any issue of *TTA*. If you can't find the collection or pick up a copy of the mag – and we all know how singularly unadventurous the chainstores are – then you should send a cheque or postal order (£5.99 for the book or £2.50 for a sample copy of the mag) to Andy Cox, TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Ely, Cambs. CB6 2LB.

You could do far worse. In fact, you could do a lot far worse.

All those who rushed out after reading last November's *Interzone* to buy a copy of Ed Gorman's excellent *Cages* collection and were disheartened (but hardly surprised – see note above *re* distribution stranglehold perpetrated by high-street stores) to find nobody had a copy... fear not! Half a dozen of the 17 stories in the prolific Gorman's new collection, *Moonchasers and Other Stories* (Forge, \$24.95), first appeared in *Cages*, so all is not lost. That leaves at least 11 stories which are new (new in collection terms) and, considering the limited availability of *Cages*, maybe the whole lot. Thus it's worth bringing this new set to people's attention.

Above all else, Gorman is a raconteur. He works the *lemme tell you a story...* side of the literary field, although the yarns he spins are lean, moody and to-the-point. Descriptive without being purple, evocative without being derivative, Gorman is a



man with a whole garage-load of tale-spinning vehicles and each time he prepares to take a trip he picks the one that's best qualified to do the job. With an Ed Gorman story, you never know what you're going to get: sometimes it's a police-procedural, sometimes a private-eye caper, occasionally a western, sometimes a small-town family saga, now and then a science-fiction or futuristic tale... and sometimes he plays *really* dirty and mixes any two of them. A riveting storyteller, whether he's working the short or the long form (but particularly the short), Gorman possesses a singularly eclectic voice. Check him out with *Moonchasers*... you'll never look back.

Bentley Little is another US writer whose style I enjoy but, while his shorter work is succinct and strange, his novels, for the most part, are another thing entirely. *The Store* (Headline, £16.99) is a case in point.

The residents of Juniper, Arizona are understandably excited at the news that America's fastest growing discount store – The Store – is coming to their small town. But things soon take an unexpected turn. The first to notice something is not quite right is technical writer Bill Davis when he sees the bodies of wild animals scattered around the proposed site for The Store. But, as is the way with such stories, he doesn't mention it to anybody. As Kurt Vonnegut might say, *and so it goes*...

Shortly before it's due to open its doors for business, its shelves loaded up with produce delivered late at night by mysterious black trucks, The Store advertises for personnel and Davis's daughter, Samantha, applies. During the interview – after Mr Lamb, the assistant manager, has attached polygraph equipment (his fingers lingering a little too long on her breasts while he does so) – Samantha is subjected to a series of questions, not all of which seem immediately relevant. Has she ever been convicted of stealing; is she a chronic drug user; has she ever performed fellatio, cunnilingus or analingus; and has she ever had a recurring dream in which she disembowelled a member of her family? All the usual stuff, in other words. Then Mr Lamb has her give a urine sample while he watches.

Naturally, Samantha doesn't tell anyone about this. Nor, a few days later, does she mention her "first day" ordeal of running the gauntlet past other employees who shout things at her – "You're ugly," and "You're fat," and "You have no ass" – while hitting her with coat-hangers and jabbing knitting-needles into her arms. When she reaches the end, bruised and bloody, her co-workers tell Samantha they love her. "I love you, too," is her reply.

And so it goes on. The Store man-

ages to force the little shopkeepers in the town out of business – some a little more "permanently" than others – and, linking into Juniper's town council, it pushes for town and county ordinances and, eventually, curfews.

The story progresses (?) and the produce on The Store's shelves expands to include voodoo dolls; calendars with titles such as "Vulvas" and "Cocks"; Magic Toadstool Dust and Itching Powder sitting alongside Masturbation Lotion and Penis Lengthening Creme [sic]; and videos featuring naked children and snuff movies. Meanwhile, a couple who have failed to maintain their loan repayments have their new baby confiscated by The Store's credit personnel unit; the bizarre "Night Managers," an all-in-black team of zombie-like creatures who patrol the aisles at night, dispatch one attempt at after-hours infiltration; and various employees are made aware (strongly) that their contracts have no get-out clause. Pretty soon, Davis and one or two others decide it's time to do something about the situation. His solution is... but, no, you wouldn't believe me if I told you.

Little's writing is crisp and confident but the story – which might have made a neat novella – is hackneyed and the characters (in fact, the entire situation) completely unbelievable. The Store could have been a sharp and incisive black comedy, using the horror vehicle to parody the current crop of mergers, downsizing, corporate skulduggery and monopolization; however, by taking the subject too seriously, Little has steered a hopelessly out-of-control course between farce (albeit unintentional) and cliché. Incidentally, although after the above this may sound like *damning by faint praise*, some mention should be made of Headline's highly effective cover design for *The Store*. Like its predecessors (or so I presume: I have only three of Little's six other Headline novels, but all are equally striking), the cover picture is featured in a key-lined box (above and below which is the title and author's name respectively) running around the spine to the back where it meets a second box containing the author's photo. Very attractive and very stylish.

Pete Crowther



Not All is Vanity

Paul Brazier

There are many kinds of vice. The least harmful of these is probably vanity, and more particularly vanity publishing – by which I mean considering one's own writing to be of sufficient merit that one is prepared to pay to publish it, rather than the more normal route of publishers paying authors for the right to publish their work.

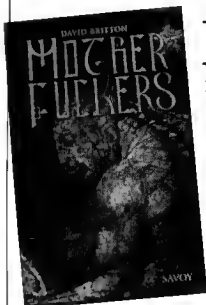
Now in this I differ from our editor, who considers vanity publishing to be a business set up to make money from writers rather than readers. Two of the books to hand fall equally into my version of vanity publishing, while only one qualifies for David Pringle's. *The Happy Halo* by Isabel Contreras (Pentland Press, £14.50) is the book we agree on. However, unlike the run-of-the-mill product of a vanity press, it is not a shoddy, badly-written, poorly-edited volume of doubtful value, but a handsomely-presented hardback of an elegantly written and rather charming humorous fantasy. No sword-and-sorcery here; rather, there is a witty and touching story of events surrounding the celebration of the millennium in one of the colonies of Heaven. The action of the story is centred around the eponymous pub – so that the story resembles *The Archers* more than *Conan the Destroyer*.

It would be a shame to reveal too much of the plot, as it is more character-driven than most fantasies I have read, but there is a solid impossible romance at its centre, with several counter-balancing sub-plots involving masons, poisoners, and great composers, and lots of subtle word-play to do with names – for instance, a vulgar middle-aged bar maid called Phyllis who does some cleaning on the side is named formally as Mrs Styne only twice, about three quarters of the way through the book.

It seems to me that most publishing is actually about self-indulgence, and that publishers love the likes of Terry Pratchett who indulge themselves outrageously and sell books with no recourse to the editor's red pen. Most published work can be (and sometimes is) knocked into shape by



a knowledgeable and sensitive editor, and Isabel Contreras could do with the lightest of editorial touches in this direction – the joke that rounds out the book is actually its weakest. Nevertheless, if you want to know how they baked a cake in a field, how Beethoven fooled the millennium commission into accepting a Puccini opera as his *missa hilaris*, and how the impossible romance is solved, with much good-natured bad language, practical jokes, and straightforward caring behaviour, you'll have to contact Pentland and get them to sell you a copy of this book.



Probably the other side of the self-indulgence coin is the kind of book published by Savoy in Manchester. No-one else will publish them, but Savoy's David Britton and Michael Butterworth are determined to challenge the law and its enforcers in the name of free speech whenever they can. When I began reviewing for *Interzone*, the first book the editor gave me was David Britton's *Lord Horror*, a book whose entire print run was subsequently impounded by the Manchester police. I said in no uncertain terms that I didn't like it but I could see what they were driving at. Since then they have frequently sent copies of their *Lord Horror* and *Meng and Ecker* comics, and Andy Robertson has reviewed them. Now comes another novel, in the shape of *Motherfuckers* (Savoy, no price shown) which follows the exploits of Meng and Ecker, and, to be honest, it is the most self-indulgent exercise in bad taste it has ever been my misfortune to encounter. Although it wasn't easy to follow, at least *Lord Horror* told a story. Meng and Ecker were first introduced in *Lord Horror* as Horror's assistants. They were once siamese twins who were divided by Dr Mengele in a concentration camp. Meng is a half-human, cross-dressing, constantly rampant psychopathic beast, while Ecker is vegan and civilized, but finally just as barbaric. The novel starts with a dream sequence – so for several pages we are treated to random acts of senseless, gratuitous and nauseating violence as experienced in Meng's dreams. I was becoming revolted enough not to want to read on when the man-beast woke up, and processed through the centre of modern Manchester killing and maiming as he went, and then starring at an event that appeared to be a bizarre mixture of Roman gladiatorial combat and Northern club comedian's act, where Meng kills,

maims, and often eats all-comers while telling obscene racist jokes.

Meng and Ecker are called to seek Lord Horror, though I couldn't fathom why, and cared less, and various famous names are invoked as having corresponded with Horror. Here for a few moments the text actually became interesting, as the seemingly ceaseless butchery and sexual deviation desists for a while and the philosophical ideas behind this book's publication are put into the mouths of various famous dead people – T.S. Eliot writes to Lord Horror,

As you know, I am interested in fascisms as a political manifestation of an ethical equation. To me, psychopathology and romance manifested on a political level equals fascism. It's the disease of the Twentieth Century. Its sick appeal is best understood within a horrific, dark, fairy tale. Which, I assume, is the metaphor for your life.

And which I assume to be the metaphor for this book. A few pages on we find Ecker thinking this:

A work of fiction that would do justice to the holocaust must take as its first principle the shattering of chronology.

The action now shifts to various Nazi concentration camps, and a sentient Volkswagen Beetle called Herbie Schopenhauer is introduced, who becomes the picaresque hero, moving from incident to incident, meeting Elvis Presley, and the parade of villainess and depravity snowballs.



BOOKS



REVIEWED

Ecker further thinks to himself:

If, and **when**, history repeats itself, moralists will be as uselessly bankrupt as the current English justice system, and another red **aether** will settle its web on the world.

Britton is probably right – has been proved right in Africa recently. But writers and publishers that dwell on the evisceration of human beings in the sort of lascivious detail seen here lay themselves open to charges of promulgating the very activities they appear to revile. Sure, Meng is a metaphor, but the message is being concealed by the messenger. Britton would do far better investigating the tangled web of emotion and politics that left the centre of Manchester a bomb-shattered wreck recently than regurgitating these grotesque and lurid romantic fantasies about a holocaust whose horror can never be fully grasped, and so must appear deeply irrelevant to today's reader.

Moving away from books, Maurizio Manzieri recently sent us a graphic novel on CD for which he had produced some of the art. Manzieri's art has graced the cover of several recent *Interzones*, and it graces the electronic pages of this novel too. *Sinkha* by Marco Patrino (Mojave, 2 West St, George Blvd, Ancester Sq, St. George, Utah 84770, no price given) (despite the American publication, everyone involved appears to be Italian – Maurizio certainly lives in Italy) is also published as a printed graphic novel, and, although I haven't seen the printed version, I have to wonder why these people bothered putting it onto a CD other than because they could. Being electronic, it means I can only read it and look at the pictures on my computer. But I already spend ten to twelve hours a day in front of that computer. Give me a book any time.

BOOKS



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Having said that, the story is engaging enough – a pretty waif, Hyleyn, who lives in the bowels of the megacity Thalassar on the desolate planet Ogon makes her escape by getting an off-worlder – A Sinkha – interested in her. In the process, we see fascinating views of the city, hear the strange noise it makes, and see a shuttle land in a huge spaceship. Much of the art is tremendously detailed and finely wrought, but I did find the people, and particularly Hyleyn herself, rather porcelain, unreal, and this stiffness ultimately sapped my interest in the story. It took an hour and a half of sitting in front of my computer to reach the end of this story, and apart from glancing at the screen-shots reproduced opposite, I have not looked back into it for this review – something I always do with paper.

In an entirely different medium, I have to say I bring good tidings. For the past few weeks, Sky One has been showing a new comedy series, *3rd Rock from the Sun*, on Friday evenings at 8pm. *3rd Rock* is apparently already a cult hit in the USA, and will be coming to BBC2 in the autumn, so I will get to see the first episode at last.

The plot is simple. A team of aliens has been stranded on Earth, and so have taken human form to learn about the humans while they wait to be rescued. So far so humdrum. However, each week a different aspect of human behaviour is put under the microscope with spectacularly funny results.

Analysing out humour is only slightly less socially acceptable than vivisection. However, *3rd Rock's* hilarity is peculiarly susceptible to analysis, as it is a product of a great idea with an extra twist, some inspired script-writing, and some of the finest ensemble playing I have ever seen on TV.

The original idea is by Bonnie Turner and Terry Turner, they wrote

The cast of *3rd Rock from the Sun*: left to right, Kristen Johnson, John Lithgow, French Stewart, and Joseph Gordon-Levitt,



the first few scripts, and now they act as executive producers. Fundamentally, the great idea is to show a group of aliens trying to learn about the strangeness that is humanity, and the extra twist is dramatic irony – that they often unconsciously exhibit too-human traits in their quest for understanding of those same traits.

What makes this work is the

extraordinary ensemble playing. John Lithgow is the High Commander, an exceptionally tall middle-aged balding man. The security chief is played by Kristen Johnson, a buxom blonde woman in her mid-20s. There is a sage older member of the crew, played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt, a small teenage boy with a pony tail and a beret, and the team is completed by French Stewart (seen recently in *Stargate*) who – well, there was an empty seat.

Lithgow is reminiscent of John Cleese at his most manic, and indeed where the three men are often dominated by the female security officer bears more than a passing resemblance to Cleese with Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett in *The Frost Report*, where the extreme difference in height was used for similar comic effect.

Honourable mention must go to Jane Curtin as Doctor Albright, Lithgow's office-sharer. She doesn't get to play an alien, but her command of different facial expressions of astonishment is a wonder to behold. If you've got Sky, stay in on Friday and watch. If you haven't, keep watching the *Radio Times*, and be sure to tell me what happens in the first episode, in case I miss it again.

Finally, the gem of the basket. *Requiem*, by Graham Joyce (Creed, £4.99; Tor \$22.95) is that rare joy, the perfect book that you didn't expect. I met Graham Joyce at a party recently and realized that, although I

had enjoyed his first novel, *Dreamside*, a lot, I hadn't read any of his subsequent work, although I had been assiduously collecting the books on my shelf. "Forget the others," Graham said. "*Requiem's* the one. Read that one." So I did. And I read the other two, *House of Lost Dreams*, and *Dark Sister*, and found they were good, and met with something of a quandary. If Graham Joyce was as good as I thought, then how come his publishers weren't pushing him for all they were worth? I want hardback copies of these books, because I want to read them over and over. Then David Pringle handed me the cover depicted below, and I realised that, while in England Graham Joyce may be undersold, the Americans seem to be taking him seriously – with valedictions from Jonathan Carroll and Michael Moorcock, and a

stunningly beautiful jacket, he looks set fair to take the USA by storm. I hope so.

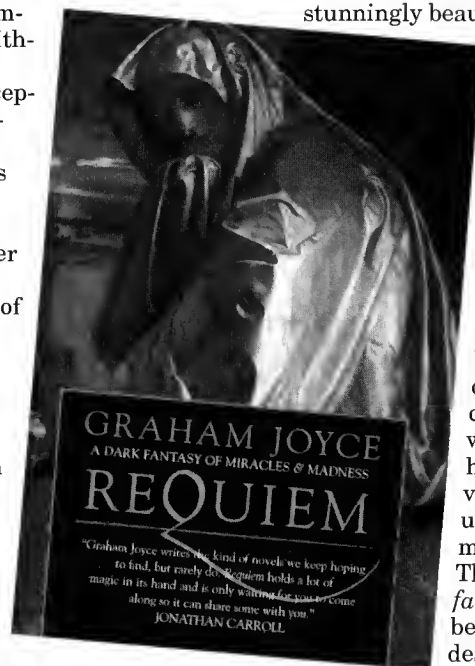
Requiem is set largely in modern Jerusalem and, against a background of rioting Arabs and trigger-happy Israeli soldiers, deals with a man coming to terms with the death of his wife, with various supernatural incursions to muddy the waters. The term *dark fantasy* could have been coined to describe Graham's work; I was

reminded of no-one so much as John Blackburn or even John Christopher. Characters are masterfully drawn, full of surprises but always believable, just like real people. I had despaired of ever reading a book this good again. The last comparable book I read was Dan Simmons' *A Song of Kali*, which has a similar exotic location and sense of oppressive and magical sunshine, but a very different story.

Of course, Graham is not a perfect writer, but his self-indulgences seem to have been largely curtailed by sensitive editing. Both David Britton and Isabel Contreras could use a similar light touch on their books. Certainly, Britton could do with reading this book, seeing how modern Jews live, and abandoning his morbid fascination with the death camps of 50 years ago.

See what happens when you find a good book? It makes you want to set the world to rights. Read Joyce and Contreras (if you can find her) and see if I am right.

Paul Brazier



The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Asher, Neal L. **The Parasite**. Illustrated by Ralph Horsley. Tanjen [52 Denman Lane, Huncote, Leicester LE9 3BS], ISBN 0-9527183-1-6, 129pp, small-press paperback, cover by Horsley, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the author is British, born 1961, and has been published widely in the small press; this looks to be fairly trad sf.) No date shown: received in June 1996.

Attanasio, A. A. **The Last Legends of Earth**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-67463-6, 557pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick van Houten, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989; the fourth and final volume in the "Radix Tetrad.") July 1996.

Bakker, Robert T. **Raptor Red**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50369-3, 284pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Youll, £4.99. (Prehistoric sf novel by a noted paleontologist; first published in the USA, 1995; set 120 million years ago, it's about a year in the life of a dinosaur; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 103.) 11th July 1996.

Brooks, Terry. **Witches' Brew**. "A Magic Kingdom of Landover Novel." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38702-3, 332pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, \$6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 1st June 1996.

Brooks, Terry. **Witches' Brew**. "A Magic Kingdom of Landover Novel." Legend,

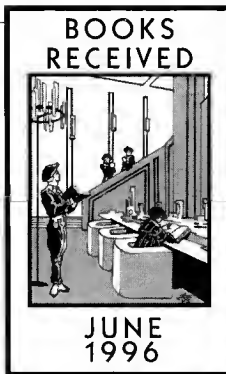
ISBN 0-09-960181-8, 304pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995 [not "1996" as it indicates in the book].) June 1996.

Bury, Stephen. **Interface**. Michael Joseph, ISBN 0-71-814162-8, 583pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, £11.99. (Near-future sf comedy-thriller, first published in the USA, 1994; "Stephen Bury" is a joint pseudonym of Neal Stephenson "and another writer" — the publishers are being coy about who this second person is, but in fact it's Stephenson's uncle, J. Frederick George.) 4th July 1996.

Buxton, James. **The Wishing Tree**. Orion, ISBN 1-85798-479-X, 330pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; Buxton, a British writer in his 30s, is described as being the author of two previous "chillers," *Subterranean* and *Strange*; this new one dives into the dark mysteries of Epping Forest — a touch of the Holdstocks, perhaps.) 22nd July 1996.

Campbell, Ramsey. **The House on Nazareth Hill**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0667-8, 374pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; this seems to be Ramsey's first new novel in some time ... but in his list of earlier books we note an unfamiliar title called *The One Safe Place* which may have been a 1995 novel we were not sent for review.) 18th July 1996.

Chalker, Jack L. **The Cybernetic Walrus: Book One of The Wonderland Gambit**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38847-X, 322pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, \$5.99. (Sf novel,



first published in the USA, 1995; it's dedicated, "To the late Philip K. Dick, two of whose early works inspired this madness.") 1st June 1996.

Clark, Simon. **Darker**. Hodder & Stoughton,

ISBN 0-340-66059-7, 410pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; the author's third novel.) 4th July 1996.

Collins, Nancy A., Edward E. Kramer and Martin H. Greenberg. **Dark Love**. Introduction by T. E. D. Klein. "Twenty-two all-original tales of lust and obsession." New English Library, ISBN 0-340-65439-2, x+402pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £6.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1995; it contains stories by Michael Blumlein, Ramsey Campbell, Ed Gorman, Stuart Kaminsky, Stephen King, Kathe Koja, Richard Laymon, John Lutz, John Shirley, the late Karl Edward Wagner and others.) 18th July 1996.

Crichton, Michael. **The Lost World**. "The successor to *Jurassic Park*." Arrow, ISBN 0-09-963781-2, xiv+430pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 103.) June 1996.

Douglas, John. **Hard Shoulder**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-66051-1, 275pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1996; this Manchester-resident author's third book; the "About the Author" note tells us that John Douglas was born in 1955, but the British Library Cataloguing in Publication data on the reverse of the title page tells us that he was born in 1931...) 18th July 1996.

Gordon, Frances. **The Burning Altar**. Headline,

ISBN 0-7472-1612-6, 311pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; "Frances Gordon" is a pseudonym of fantasy writer Bridget Wood.) 18th July 1996.

Hamilton, Peter F. **The Reality Dysfunction: Book One of the Night's Dawn Series**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-67563-0, 955pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1996; reviewed, fairly glowingly, by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 106; a lot of copies of this book are going to end up serving a useful life as doorstops.) 7th June 1996.

Harman, Andrew. **The Deity Dozen**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-978851-9, 326pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; seventh in this author's series with the punning titles.) 1st August 1996.

Harris, Steve. **Black Rock**. Vista, ISBN 0-575-60082-9, 447pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1996; Gollancz seem to be picking up the "Headline habit" of issuing their horror paperbacks only a few months after the hardcover.) 27th June 1996.

Harrison, Harry, and John Holm. **King and Emperor**. "The Hammer and the Cross, Book 3." Legend, ISBN 0-09-930305-1, 452pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £16.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first edition [?]; the American [Tor Books] edition, listed here a couple of issues ago, was also scheduled for July, but we are not sure which has priority; "John Holm," whose name does not appear on the cover, is a pseudonym of Tom Shippey.) 18th July 1996.

Harrison, Harry, and John Holm. **One King's Way**. "Bestselling sequel to *The Hammer and the Cross*." Legend, ISBN 0-09-930308-6,

426pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £5.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first published in 1995 [not "1994" as it states inside].) 18th July 1996.

Hill, Reginald. **Matlock's System.** Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-4993-X, 213pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK as *Heart Clock* by "Dick Morland," 1973; when this first appeared Hill was a little-known crime novelist; now that his reputation has soared in the crime field [with recent TV adaptations of his "Dalziel and Pascoe" novels] old pseudonymous works such as this are being reissued under his real name; it's not a bad piece of sf entertainment, in the mainstreamers' favoured mode of near-future dystopian satire; this edition contains a new one-page introduction by the author in which he points to his own political prescience; it's dedicated to "Brian and Margaret" – presumably the Aldisses.) 25th July 1996.

Jackson, Shirley. **The Masterpieces of Shirley Jackson: The Lottery, The Haunting of Hill House, We Have Always Lived in the Castle.** Introduction by Donna Tartt. Raven, ISBN 1-85487-437-3, xii+531pp, B-format paperback, cover by Melanie Manchot, £7.99. (Horror omnibus, first edition [?]; the three books assembled here, a story-collection and two novels, first appeared in the USA in 1949, 1959 and 1962.) 28th June 1996.

Jones, Richard Glyn, ed. **Cybersex.** Foreword by Will Self. "Aliens, Neurosex and Cyberorgasms." Raven, ISBN 1-85487-447-0, xvi+416pp, B-format paperback, cover by Phil Marriott, £6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains mainly reprinted stories, many of them well-known, by Martin Amis, Storm Constantine [an original story], Candas Jane Dorsey, Greg Egan, Harlan

Ellison, Pat Murphy, Jeff Noon, Frederik Pohl, Rudy Rucker [an original story], James Tiptree Jr, Lisa Tuttle [a reprint from *Interzone*], Kurt Vonnegut, Ian Watson [an extract from his French-published novel *Orgasmachine*, also known as *The Woman Factory*, appearing for first time in English], Connie Willis, Gene Wolfe, George Zebrowski and others.) 17th July 1996.

Jordan, Robert. **A Crown of Swords: Book Seven of The Wheel of Time.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-367-0, xi+658pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 4th July 1996.

Joyce, Graham. **Requiem.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86088-9, 286pp, hardcover, cover by Girolamo Savoldo, \$22.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1995; proof copy received; although it's his fourth novel, this is Joyce's first American publication; the cover is plastered with commendations from the likes of Jonathan Carroll, Ramsey Campbell ["I wish I could write half as eloquently"], M. John Harrison and Michael Moorcock.) October 1996.

Kerr, Katharine, and Mark Kreighbaum. **Palace: A Novel of the Pinch.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224642-2, 437pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; it's described as "a brilliant new science fantasy epic.") 25th July 1996.

King, Stephen. **Rose Mad-der.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-64014-6, 595pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by James Love-



grove in *Interzone* 102.) 27th June 1996.

Ligotti, Thomas. **The Nightmare Factory.** Foreword by Poppy Z. Brite. Raven, ISBN 1-85487-436-5, xxi+551pp, B-format paperback,

cover by Eric Dinyer, £8.99. (Horror collection, first edition; this is sort of an omnibus of all Ligotti's short stories to date – but not quite: some of the tales from his first and third collections, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* [1989] and *Noctuary* [1994], have been dropped, but his second book, *Grimmscribe* [1991], appears to be here in full and there is a fourth section, subtitled "Teatro Grotesco and Other Tales," which collects six new stories; Ligotti may be over-mannered for some tastes, too self-consciously in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, but then some critics will hail this as one of the great, essential books of modern imaginative writing; buy it!) 17th July 1996.

Lovecraft, H. P. **The Transition of H. P. Lovecraft: The Road to Madness.** Introduction by Barbara Hambly. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38422-9, vii+372pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Jude Palencar, \$10. (Horror collection, first edition; proof copy received; this handsome volume is part of an ongoing "de luxe" repackaging of all Lovecraft's fiction; it contains the novel-la "Herbert West-Reanimator," the short novel *At the Mountains of Madness* and over 25 short stories and fragments.) 1st October 1996.

Lumley, Brian. **Necroscope: The Lost Years, Volume II.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-64963-1, 468pp, hardcover, cover by George Underwood, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 3rd October 1996.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Dinosaur Planet.** Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-4973-5, 189pp, hardcover, cover by Derek Colli-gan, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1978; it has appeared previously in the UK as a paperback original.) 25th July 1996.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Red Star Rising.** "The Second Chronicles of Pern." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03770-7, 335pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Weston, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1996; a new "Dragonriders" novel, with a title which makes it sound like some long-lost work of Soviet sf.) 8th August 1996.

McCarthy, Helen. **The Anime! Movie Guide.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-631-4, 285pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Chrono-alphabetical illustrated guide to over 600 Japanese animated films since 1983; first edition; the productions covered are mostly in the fantasy area, though as the accompanying publicity says, "anime is huge, encompassing everything from soap opera to cyberpunk"; it's difficult to find information on these movies in more general film guides, so this may prove to be a very useful book; recommended.) 19th July 1996.

Martin, George R. R. **A Game of Thrones: Book One of A Song of Ice and Fire.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224584-1, 694pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a blockbuster, in standard heroic-fantasy mould, by an author hitherto best known for his sf, his TV scripts and his "Wild Cards" shared-world anthologies; we listed the American proof, last issue, as the likely first edition – but it seems this UK edition just pips it by a week.) 5th August 1996.

Moorcock, Michael. **A Nomad of the Time Streams: A Scientific Romance.** "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 6." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-

85798-448-X, 549pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Reeve, £6.99. (Sf omnibus, first published in 1993; it contains: *The Worlord of the Air* [1971], *The Lond Leviathon* [1974] and *The Steel Tsor* [1981], all "substantially revised" since their first appearances; the three novels previously appeared in an omnibus from Granada Publishing entitled *The Nomod of Time* [1984].) 10th June 1996.

Nicholls, Stan. **The Book of Shadows.** Point Fantasy, ISBN 0-590-13272-5, 281pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £3.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first edition; Nicholls's second from Scholastic/Point.) June 1996.

Nylund, Eric S. **Pawn's Dream.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-64948-8, 345pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick van Houten, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 109.) 18th July 1996.

Olsen, Lance. **Time Famine: A Novel.** Permeable Press [47 Noe St., #4, San Francisco, CA 94114-1017, USA], ISBN 1-882633-15-6, 324pp, trade paperback, cover by Andi Olsen, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 30th September 1996.

Rice, Anne. **Memnoch the Devil.** "The Vampire Chronicles." Arrow, ISBN 0-09-960371-3, 401pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 99.) 1st August 1996.

Royle, Nicholas. **Saxophone Dreams.** Penguin, ISBN 0-14-024387-9, 291pp, B-format paperback, cover by Colum Leith, £6.99. (Mainstream novel, with fantasy elements, by a noted writer of horror/fantasy short stories; first edition; Royle's second novel, it's set in various parts of Europe in

1989, "a world of collective dreams, intoxicating jazz and magical jaunts into the landscapes of Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux.") 27th June 1996.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **The Fey: Sacrifice.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-310-6, 550pp, A-format paperback, cover by David O'Connor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1995.) 10th June 1996.

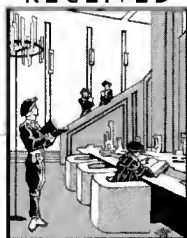
Silverberg, Robert. **The Collected Stories of Robert Silverberg, Volume Four: The Road to Nightfall.** Voyager, ISBN 0-586-21372-4, 347pp, B-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf collection, first edition [?]; although it's the fourth book in the set, this contains the earliest work – the best of Silverberg's short fiction from the 1950s, most of which has appeared previously in now-out-of-print collections such as *Godling*, *Go Home!* [1964], *To Worlds Beyond* [1965] and *Needle in a Timestack* [1966]; the introduction and extensive story head-notes make for an interesting "autobiography" of this immensely prolific writer.) 8th July 1996.

Silverberg, Robert. **Starborne.** Voyager, ISBN 0-246-13721-5, 291pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 110.) 25th July 1996.

Stasheff, Christopher. **The Oathbound Wizard.** "Book 2 of A Wizard in Rhyme." Legend, ISBN 0-09-955691-X, 409pp, A-format paperback, cover by Sanjulian, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993 [not "1996" as it states in the book].) June 1996.

Stephenson, Neal. **The Diamond Age.** Roc, ISBN 0-

BOOKS RECEIVED



JUNE
1996

45-145481-2, 499pp, A-format paperback, £5.99 (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; according to the back cover, it should carry the sub-title "or A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer,"

but that does not appear on the title page [one can understand why the publishers weren't keen]; they're still billing Stephenson as "the Quentin Tarantino of post-cyberpunk sf"; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 102.) 4th July 1996.

Sterling, Bruce. **Holy Fire.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-09958-2, 325pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1996; so now we know: the British, Orion/Millennium, printing listed here last month was in fact the first edition; why don't UK publishers say when they have a "world first" by a famous American author on their hands? – they'd probably sell more copies!) 16th September 1996.

Taves, Brian, and Stephen Michaluk, Jr., eds. **The Jules Verne Encyclopedia.** Foreword by André Laurie. Scarecrow Press [distributed in Britain by Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-8108-2961-4, xvii+257pp, hardcover, £51.80. (Illustrated bibliographical companion and essay collection devoted to the great French sf novelist; first published in the USA, 1996; this is the US edition with a British price; a handsome large-format volume, each of its double-columned pages containing twice the text of an average book's page, it's crammed with useful information and opinion on Verne's works [including, especially, an extremely detailed bibliography of all English-language translations and editions, which must have been a huge task in itself]; an "encyclopedia" it isn't, however – we do

wish publishers would stop misusing that word – but rather a glorious scrap-book; recommended to anyone with more than a passing interest in Verne.) 22nd August 1996.

VanderMeer, Jeff. **Dradin in Love: A Tale of Elsewhen & Otherwhere.** Illustrated by Michael Shores. Buzzcity Press [PO Box 38190, Tallahassee, FL 32315, USA], ISBN 0-9652200-0-1, 98pp, small-press paperback, \$9.95. (Fantasy novella, first edition; the author, a stalwart of the little magazines, is described as having appeared in "over 120 publications in six languages in 12 countries"; this is his first book of any substance, however; it's a classy small-press publication – nicely produced, signed by the author, well-illustrated, probably an instant collectors' item.) 1st September 1996.

Walker, Steve. **22nd Century Blues.** Coronet, ISBN 0-340-66663-3, x+371pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; this is a follow-up to an earlier book, *21st Century Blues* [1994], which we were not sent for review; not merely another Adams or Pratchett clone, it looks to be very eccentric stuff – perhaps more in the Robert Rankin ambit; the author, born 1956, is British and hitherto most active as a radio scriptwriter.) No date shown: received in June 1996.

Williams, Michael. **Arcady.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-67456-3, vii+486pp, hardcover, cover by Mick van Houten, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this seems to be a "breakthrough" book for an author previously known for his TSR games-related fantasy novels [he is also a poet, having written most of the pretty little verses which embellish Weis & Hickman's "DragonLance" books].) 18th July 1996.

Williamson, Philip G. **Citadel.** "A Chronicle of

Firstworld." Legend, ISBN 0-09-931071-6, 289pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1995.) June 1996.

Woodbury, Francine G. **Shade and Shadow.** "Del Rey Discovery." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39428-3, 313pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, \$4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's a debut book, set in Oxford, by an author who sounds British although the biographical notes tell us little more than the facts that she

was born in France and now resides with her husband in Massachusetts.) 1st June 1996.

Yaph, Beth. **The Crocodile Fury.** Women's Press, ISBN 0-7043-4466-1, 329pp, B-format paperback, cover by Gail Nevill, £6.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1992; the author, of Chinese and Thai extraction, was born in Malaysia in 1964 and has

BOOKS RECEIVED



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lived in Australia since she was 20; this was her debut book, and appears to be in "magic realist" style; it has won various overseas literary awards, including the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction.) 11th July 1996.

Zahn, Timothy. **Conqueror's Legacy.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40855-0, 486pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, £4.99. (Sf nov-

el, first published in the USA, 1996; third in the *Star Wars*-lookalike trilogy which began with *Conquerors' Pride* and *Conquerors' Heritage* [the latter of which Bantam UK seem to have published at some point but didn't send us for review].) 11th July 1996.

Zindell, David. **The Wild: Book Two of A Requiem for Homo Sapiens.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649712-8, 700pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1995; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 106.) 17th June 1996.

Carey, Diane. **Invasion! Book One: First Strike.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-54002-5, 289pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; it's the first volume of a four-partner, conceived by John J. Ordover and Diane Carey [the others will be written by different authors]; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) July 1996.

Grant, Charles L. **Goblins & Whirlwind.** "The X-Files." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225546-4, 435pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Sf/horror TV-series spinoff omnibus, first edition; based on the characters created by Chris Carter; the two novels originally appeared separately in the USA, 1995.) 8th July 1996.

Jeter, K. W. **Blade Runner 2: The Edge of Human.** Orion, ISBN 1-75280-360-3, 340pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, a sequel by another hand to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*; first published in the USA, 1995; it's a sequel both to Dick's novel and to the 1982 film based on it, *Blade Runner*; reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 110.) 1st July 1996.

Johnson, Shane. **Star Wars Technical Journal.** Box-tree, ISBN 0-7522-0391-6, 190pp, hardcover, £25. (Illustrated pseudo-technical guide to weapons, spacecraft, etc., featured in the *Star Wars* sf

Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed navelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecraps (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

films; first published in the UK, 1995; originally published in the USA in magazine format in three parts, 1994; the material originates with *Starlag* magazine; the previous UK edition was, apparently, a paperback.) Late entry: 27th May publication, received in June 1996.

Jordan, Robert. **The Conan Chronicles: Conan the Invincible, Conan the Defender, Conan the Unconquered.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-978601-X, 510pp, hardcover, cover by

Fred Gambino, £15.99. (Sequel-by-another-hand fantasy omnibus, first published in the USA, 1995 [not "1996" as it implies in the book - what has come over Random House/Legend recently? - that's four times they've got it wrong this month: is there a new policy of trying to mislead the reader as to a book's true publication date?]; the three Robert E. Howard pastiches which make up the volume were originally published in 1982-1983 [not that Legend tell us that]; "Robert Jordan" is

a pseudonym of James O. Rigney, Jr; this UK edition mentions the hero's original creator, Robert E. Howard, nowhere - and that's a shame.) June 1996.

Lane, Andy, and Justin Richards, eds. **Decalog 3: Consequences-Ten Stories, Seven Doctors, One Chain of Events.** "Doctor Who." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20478-6, 308pp, A-format paperback, cover by Colin Howard, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff anthology, first edition; it contains original stories by Stephen Bowkett, Guy Clapperton, Craig Hinton, Ben Jeapes, Gareth Roberts and others.) 18th July 1995.

Miles, Lawrence. **Christmas on a Rational Planet.** "Doctor Who: The New Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20476-X, 277pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mike Posen, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition; this one appears to be by a new British writer; it has a nice title and looks interesting.) 18th July 1996.

Stirling, S. M. **Betrays.** "Babylon 5, Book #6." Box-tree, ISBN 0-7522-0163-8, 279pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; inspired by the Warner Bros. TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski.) 24th June 1996.

Other media

We haven't been in the habit of listing audio-visual review materials, but increasing quantities of them seem to be coming in, so here are a few recent examples:

Pratchett, Terry. **Interesting Times, Lords and Ladies and Men at Arms.** Corgi Audio, each containing two cassettes, £8.99 each. (Three-hour abridged versions of Pratchett's humorous fantasy novels, read by Tony Robinson; good fun.) June 1996.

Wayne, Jeff. **The War of the Worlds.** Sony Music, two compact discs, CDZ 96000, no price shown. (Rock-music adaptation of H. G. Wells's classic sf novel, narrated by Richard Burton; first released as a record in 1978, now "digitally re-mastered" with four additional tracks; surprisingly effective, and quite faithful to the novel.) 24th June 1996.

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INTERZONE COLLECTION for sale to good home. Complete from 30 (July 1989) to date, total eighty issues; good condition. Offers to Mark Porter, 01455-611345 (Leicester/Coventry).

HARM'S WAY – "What if Charles Dickens had written a space opera?" (*Locus*) – large paperback, £3.50. *The Hour of the Thin Ox and Other Voices*, paperbacks, £1.50 each. Prices include postage. Colin Greenland, 98 Sturton St., Cambridge CB1 2QA (note new address).

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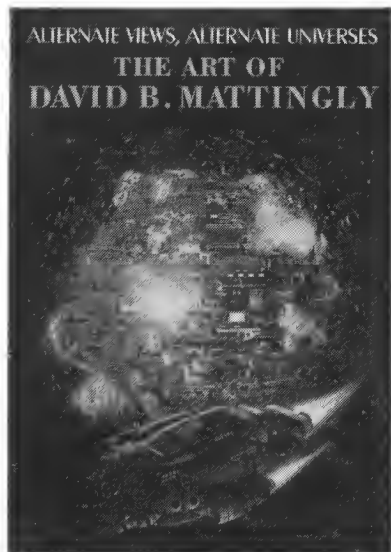
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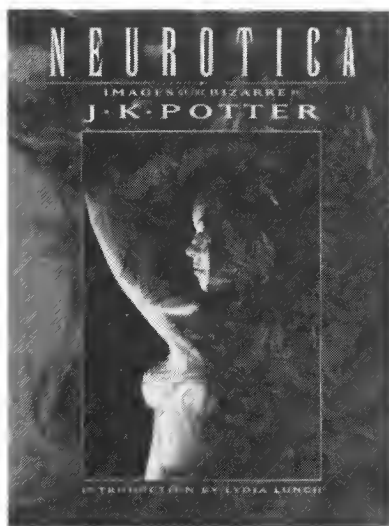
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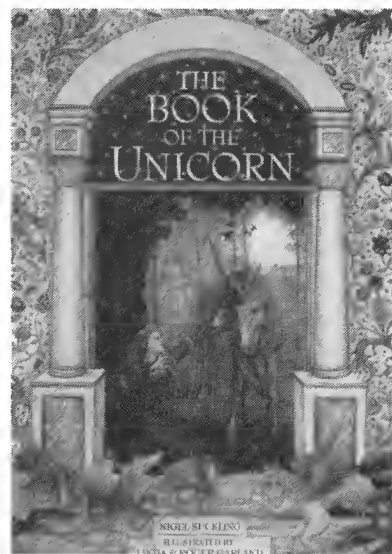
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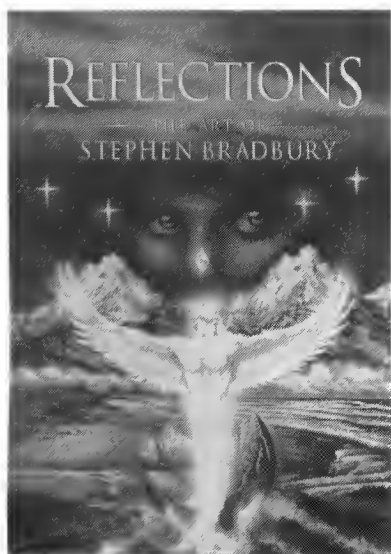
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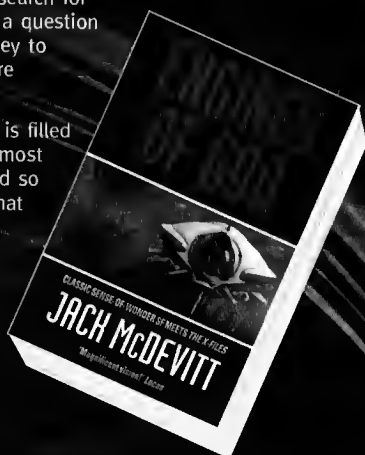
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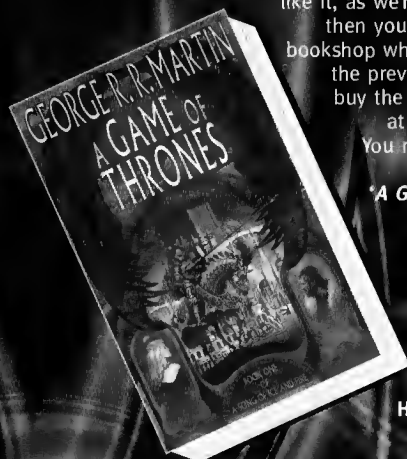
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